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AUTHOR Ediger, Marlow

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the difficulty students often face when many new words are simultaneously introduced in a text. It suggests teachers may address this difficulty in a number of ways, including the following: writing to a publisher to suggest improvements; providing lists of new words to students before reading selections; and focusing on context clues. In addition, a teacher should also ensure that the students work to sound out new words, focusing on phonics. The paper advises that textbooks should be chosen based on how words are introduced; it suggests that new words should be introduced gradually instead of simultaneously, and sentences should first be simple and eventually become more complicated as a textbook progresses. (PM)

Factors Making Expository Reading Difficult.

by Marlow Ediger

FACTORS MAKING EXPOSITORY READING DIFFICULT

When supervising university student teachers in public school classrooms, the author's attention was brought, by the cooperating teacher, to selected pages in a social studies textbook. These pages had a plethora of new concepts. On one page, for example, sixth graders were to experience reading the following new terms: meridians, parallels, latitude, longitude, degrees, and polar regions. The cooperating teacher told about the difficulties pupils experienced in being able to identify each word in print, let alone knowing the meaning of these words.

The complexity of expository reading materials does increase tremendously in difficulty when an excessive number of new words are placed on a single page of print discourse. Teachers need to write to the publisher to state how textbooks may be improved so that more optimal pupil achievement is possible. To omit those pages of complexity does not work since future references are made sequentially to previous pages of content in the textbook (See Ediger, 1978, 412- 416).

Introducing New Words in Reading

The manual section of a basal text may list the new words for pupils to read and understand in print. These can be a valuable resource for teachers to use in selecting new words to introduce to pupils prior to reading a selection. However, pupils are at different levels of achievement and important adjustments need to be made in which words to introduce. Thus, the teacher needs to study and attempt to realize at which level each pupil is reading. The teacher needs to list words, in a notebook, which pupils have difficulty with in identifying and provide needed help here.

The new words need to be printed in manuscript style on the chalkboard for all to see clearly. The teacher should point to each new word as it is being pronounced clearly. The new word may be printed within a sentence or in isolation. The latter helps pupils to focus upon the individual word only, whereas the former assists pupils to notice that words are used contextually. The author has noticed teachers who even have one new word visible at a time, printed on the chalkboard, to avoid pupils having too many stimuli to look at when being introduced to a new word! Selected teachers here would cover all new words on the chalkboard with the pull down map located directly above and then lift the map for the next word to be introduced. The point being, and wisely so, that pupils view a word carefully so that it

will be identified accurately while reading the expository text. Learners may then make discoveries of selected phonics elements. These elements include noticing words which begin alike and/or end alike. How much time to take in teaching phonics at this point depends upon the needs of the learner (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Seventeen).

Phonics and Reading in the Content Areas

Reading expository materials should be done to secure ideas, vital facts, concepts, and generalizations. However, pupils may fail to glean important subject matter due to the inability to recognize words independently. Thus, not being able to identify words may hinder comprehension. This is true also if a pupil reads haltingly and struggles to make sense of the abstract symbols or graphemes. When being an elementary age pupil, the author was asked by the teacher to pronounce words orally to those who raised their hands when reading silently. Up to a point, this was OK, but he would also have liked to read to himself and not spend so much time pronouncing words to others. Each pupil likes to benefit optimally from a developmentally appropriate reading curriculum. It is imperative then to assist pupils to become fluent readers and learn to use appropriate word attack skills in a language which is not as consistent in grapheme/phoneme relationships as are selected other languages. But there is considerable consistency in initial consonants in words being read. Where consistency is involved, the teacher should assist pupils to determine the unknown by "sounding out" the sound/symbol relationship in unknown words encountered. The following initial consonants are highly consistent between symbol and sound --- b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, y. The letter "h," for example, may lack as much consistency as desired with a common word such as "hour." However, there are a plethora of common words beginning with "h" which do have this consistency -- heart, health, her, him, and so on. The teacher needs to help pupils make the grapheme/phoneme connection where feasible. Help only should be given as needed, not for the sake of doing so. If a pupil is competent in word recognition, he/she should not be drilled in phonics instruction. It makes sense, though, to help a pupil identify a word in context by having him/her sound out the initial consonant and, if possible, to notice other phonetic elements when needed, to identify the unknown (See also, Weaver, 2000).

Identifying important consistently used syllables may be taught to pupils as needed. A word may not be new to the pupil if

he/she notices an important prefix such as "un" in a word such as unimportant. The unknown can become the known by identifying a prefix in a word.

The above learnings can be emphasized in expository reading and pupils can still focus upon ideas and subject matter. The word recognition techniques are stressed to help pupils read content, not for the sake of learning phonics and syllabication skills.

Context Clues in Expository Reading

A first intervention point in pupils facing problems in word recognition when redoing subject matter is to guide learners to use context clues. This is an holistic approach in identifying the unknown. The teacher or a peer may help pupils with the unknown by asking for that word which makes sense within the total framework of the sentence or sentences being read. If several words do fit in, then the first consonant letter may provide further clues for word recognition. Generally, the context and the initial consonant sound of the unknown word gives the needed information for word identification.

Meaning theory is involved when context clues are used to identify the unknown word. It is a very valuable approach to use. Thus, for meaning and understanding to accrue in reading, the learner needs to fit in a word for the unknown which will make sense.

Expository content must be understandable to the reader. Reading involves obtaining ideas; the mechanics of reading such as phonics and syllabication skills are there to assist pupils in attaching meaning to what is being read. When irregularly spelled words appear in print, phonics is not to useful to help in word recognition. These words should be introduced prior to pupil's reading the selection and learned as sight words. Words such as the following are irregularly spelled: through, bough, though, tough, cough, dough, rough. These words contain the "ough" letters and yet each is pronounced differently from the other. Learning words by sight means that the pupil meets up with the same words frequently and commits these to memory for immediate recall (See Gunning, 2000).

Writers for pupils' expository reading materials need to be

1. appropriate for involved readers. Commonly used words based on research studies may provide clues as to which words to use in writing these materials. When viewing Dolch's (1955) research study of 220 most frequently used words by pupils, not all of these words are phonetically spelled. Thus,

there are useful words in print which may not posses the grapheme/phoneme regularity in spelling, but pupils do read and write them due to their being functional.

2. in the speaking vocabulary of pupils. Pupils tend to learn selected words in oral communication due to their being relevant to personal needs. What is read also must meet needs of pupils.

3. have illustrations on the page directly related to the printed script. These illustrations assist pupils to attach meaning to the abstract ideas experienced in print. The Teacher's Manual should provide assistance on how to help pupils attach meaning to print discourse and the related illustrations. Identifying unknown words can be done through an illustration. for example, an unknown word may be identified through looking at the related illustration, especially for young children. Perhaps, an increased number of illustrations should appear on pages for older age pupils also, than is presently the case. All illustrations should relate directly to the printed ideas.

4. on the reading level of the learner. In any classroom, the gap in reading achievement from high to low may be great. For example, in a heterogeneously grouped fourth grade class, the range in reading achievement may be from the second grade level to the sixth or seventh grade level. The teacher here has a tremendous responsibility in assisting all pupils to achieve and learn. Audio tapes and CDs should be available to pupils who need to listen to the contents therein as they follow along in silent reading from their own texts. This will help to minimize gaps between the good reader and those needing more aid in reading achievement.

5. written on three reading levels, but contain the same subject matter and illustrations. By having developmentally appropriate texts for pupils, each should be able to learn from reading print discourse.

6. aware of the need for listing related library books in the manual. A pupil may learn much from reading a library book written on the same topic or by the same writer, as is contained in the text. The author noticed in selected classes while supervising university student teachers in the public schools that pupils could read library books, when available on the same topic as contained in the textbook, and contribute much there from, to the ongoing class discussion. Pupils, too, also need to be accountable for reading and achieving objectives of instruction.

7. have books available for young children containing large print to be used as a Big Book approach in teaching reading. The Big Book needs to be large enough for all to see in the group

being taught. Thus, the teacher may discuss the related illustrations in the Big Book before the print discourse reading activity commences. The teacher then reads aloud the contents, pointing to each word, as the pupils follow along from the Big Book. This assists pupils to notice the words contained therein and help to overcome word identification problems. Next, the pupils should read aloud together with the teacher the same printed words as the teacher again points to each. Rereading may occur as frequently as desired and is necessary. The Big Book approach should be used with pupils, in particular, who have problems in word recognition.

8. use a predictable approach in writing printed materials so that pupils may experience success in reading. Thus, the pupil has security in reading in that he/she may develop awareness of ensuing subject matter. Predictability in reading content assists pupils to make sense out of print discourse.

9. emphasize a variety of ways to help pupils attach meaning to words in context. One way is to give the meaning of a new word in context. Additional approaches are to provide a synonym or antonym for the new word or use the new word with a related appositive.

10. use imagery to make a word meaningful. Imagery includes both similes and/or metaphors (Ediger, 1986, 25- 33).

The new words should be spread out within a chapter, not be contained on a single page. The gradual sequence in presenting new words helps pupils in identifying and reading each new word meaningfully. Too many new words on a single page to read is frustrating and complex. To guide pupils in pronouncing a new word correctly, the writers of the book should use phonetic spelling, placed in parenthesis, for selected irregularly spelled words in context. It becomes annoying to the reader if too many of these words are spelled phonetically in parenthesis. To assist pupils in contextual word recognition skills, there needs to be repetition of vital words in the subject matter. What the author feels to be annoying in reading science and mathematics content is when every English given measurement also contains the related metric measurement in parenthesis. In addition to its annoyance, no learner can remember both systems simultaneously. Why not rather use one or the other, preferably the English system since it is used more commonly as compared to the metric system of measurement? The metric system has its important context too, in that there are excellent children's library books written about the metric system. In mathematics, if the metric system is being studied,

then the metric system alone should be taught. In science, the metric system alone should be used since measures of atoms and molecules are in evidence. If pupils ask how a meter stick compares with a yard, the comparison can definitely be made by holding up the two sticks to make the comparison. It is ridiculous for pupils, however, to learn that a meter is 39.37 inches. The English and the metric system are two different systems used to measure length, area, and solids. The author well remembers when in the early 1950's, he taught two years on the West Bank of the Jordan and asked the carpenter in the Mennonite Central Committee woodshed, in Jericho, how many yards long the olive wood tray was which he was making. As the question was being raised, the carpenter was holding up a meter stick to measure lengths and widths. The carpenter looked up in amazement and asked, "What is a yard?" He had no concept, as a carpenter, what a yard was (See Ediger, 1981, 8- 12).

Syntactic and Semantic Considerations

Using appropriate syntactic structures which enhance pupil reading of a selection is a worthwhile consideration for writers of expository materials. These should adhere to stressing, gradually, more complex syntactic considerations. Easiest to read are those which contain the subject predicate pattern of sentence. Modifiers such as adjectives and adverbs, initially, should be few. An increased number of sentence patterns may be brought in as learners become more proficient in reading subject matter. Thus, the following may be added to the subject predicate sentence pattern: subject, predicate, direct object; subject, predicate, indirect object, direct object; subject, predicate, predicate nominative; and subject, predicate, predicate, predicate adjective pattern. In sequence complex sentences, compound sentences, and compound complex sentence patterns may be included. Dependent clauses should be placed in content as they provide enriched meanings for readers. They may be adjective, adverb, or noun dependent clauses. Sentences which increase in length make it necessary to understand syntax to increase comprehension and decoding skills.

Different purposes in reading need to be emphasized. Skimming and scanning, for example, might be stressed when pupils are locating information for problem solving. Thus, the need is there to skim/scan the table of contents, the index, the glossary, or the dictionary to locate what is needed in information. It is ridiculous to read every word when attempting

to locate what is vital from the perviously mentioned reference sources (Parker, 2001).

Semantics deals with pupils determining proper meanings from content read. There will be, of course, differences in interpretation. These should be discussed and can even be debated. An exciting discussion is a motivator to learn for many pupils. Statements which are open ended need to be sorted out and elaborated upon. In depth study is important as compared to survey approaches. If pupils are reading the open ended sentence/paragraph that President Woodrow Wilson, toward the close of World War One, wanted to make the world safe for democracy, what did he mean? Critical thinking is involved in ascertaining what President Wilson meant by the concept democracy. Furthermore, pupils need to understand what is meant by "making the world safe (for democracy)." President George W. Bush wanted to free the world from terrorism; there are logical similarities between the two statements or goals. Perhaps, the writers of the text may provide several meanings and then the teacher may guide pupils to brainstorm for other learnings. Problem solving, critical thought, as well as creative thinking are silent here. Semantics then involves interpretation of what is meant when there are oral or print utterances (Ediger, 2001, Chapter Nine).

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Truman State University
201 W. 22nd, Box 417
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