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READING COMPREHENSION: A Repundant Phrase

by Yetta Goodman

Reading is a language process. The purpose of language is communication. Comprehension must be involved for reading to be taking place. There is *no* reading without comprehension. Programs or instructional approaches which do not focus on comprehension may interfere with the development of proficient reading.

All readers from the beginning of learning to read make use the grapho-phonetic system (the relationship of sounds and letters), the syntactic or grammatical system and the semantic or meaning system of language. (Clay 1967 and Goodman, 1971) They do this intuitively by virtue of being users of a language.

At any point that readers overuse any one of the language systems to the exclusion of others, there seems to be a breakdown in the reading process.

Usually, when readers overuse any one system, it is the grapho-phonetic system. This is characterized by children omitting words which are unfamiliar to them, making four or more attempts to sound out a word while reading orally or producing a look alike substitute which makes little sense such as reading: *He was riding on a house for He was riding on a horse.* This overuse of phonics analysis to the exclusion of making sense is due in part to an over emphasis on phonics and other word attack skills in early reading instruction. If such an over emphasis continues to be the focus of reading instruction for a number of years it is not uncommon to find readers in special programs and classes for reluctant or disabled readers suffering from *OVERSKILL*.

Unfortunately the concern with test scores also reinforces the focus on

isolated, abstract units of language. Developers of standardized tests lack the sophistication of evaluating comprehension in reading. Tests often focus on letter and word recognition. The paragraphs used in standardized tests for comprehension usually focus on knowledge or content unrelated to the lives of readers. We must find other means of evaluating reading proficiency and not permit standardized test items to decide the focus of reading instruction. (Goodman and Burke (1971)

"Skills" fragment and isolate language into highly abstract units. Learning abstract units is a more complex task for young readers than learning to handle the same unit embedded in a familiar language context. Language in its whole and natural state is greater than the sum of its parts. Sounds change depending on linguistic environment such as the word *can* in the sentence:

Can you put it in the trash can?

Words change sounds as well as grammatical function depending on linguistic environment such as the word *police* in the sentences:

I will call the police and

The police car will be coming soon

Sentences change meaning from one language context to the other. For example consider the following:

Mary whispered to her husband as she furtively pointed to the bride's ring. *"Look at the size of that stone!"*

"Look at the size of that stone."

The highway construction foreman shouted loudly to all the men as he surveyed the huge boulder that the avalanche had placed in the path of his construction project.

Children learn to select the appropriate cues to minimize any confusion

in oral language because: 1) of all the cues which exist in an oral language environment 2) the oral language setting is familiar to the children and they know the limits or constraints of what will or will not be discussed in that environment and 3) children know that they, themselves must understand or comprehend the message being communicated. The test of whether understanding has occurred is not dependent on a red check on a paper or a disappointed look on a teacher's face.

Written language can provide the same kinds of cues if reading instruction helps focus on meaning and thus keeps all the cueing systems in proper relationship.

If children know from the beginning of their reading that reading is similar to listening then they can use their language sense to predict, to reread and correct or to continue reading and search for additional cues if their predictions don't work out.

An emphasis on isolated skills makes readers believe that each letter, each word, period and comma in written language is equally significant to every other letter, word or detail. In language learning it is important to differentiate the significant from the insignificant. Readers in difficulty often exhibit an inability to treat language phenomena in a variable way. Rather than try an appropriate substitute like *pony* for *horse* or *house* for *home* which proficient readers tend to do, less proficient readers will either omit the word or keep after the word, trying again and again unproductively to sound it out. Such readers sometimes believe that the only way to learn a word is to be given that word by the teacher. Such children will say "I haven't had that word yet" or "We didn't learn that yet." These children tend not to trust their own sense of language and fall further and further behind as they continue to process each word and each letter as if each carries as much information as any other. Such students will even stop at

proper nouns which would be difficult if not impossible for adult readers and try to sound them out. This takes so much energy that the reader will be discouraged at the end of a sentence containing one such name. (How did you handle the name Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn when you saw it for the first time? I bet you didn't reach for your Russian-English dictionary.)

Even, however when readers focus on graphic information there are times the human ability to produce language seems to emerge.

When focused on letter-sound correspondence or provided with minimal language context beginning readers are known to confuse words which are similar in configuration or letter shape. Sometimes they even begin to reverse some letter-sound sequences producing *on* for *no*, *spot* for *stop* and *was* for *saw*. When these phenomena are examined in the reading of a whole story and evaluated in terms of what language phenomena are involved in producing such miscues a complex picture emerges.

In context *was* is substituted for *saw* occasionally but rarely if ever is *saw* substituted for *was*. In addition, the *was* for *saw* substitutions occur in subject-verb-object sentences like:

TEXT: I saw a monkey

READER: I was a monkey.

However, when *was* is a verb marker or when *was* is in a subject-verb-adjective sentence such as *I was happy* a different set of constraints is involved and the same type of miscues are not produced. Also, if one considers that these sentences are embedded in long stories where both semantic and syntactic constraints operate, then it becomes easier to understand why certain miscues do not occur in contextual material to the same degree as they occur in isolated word lists or unrelated sentences.

Another such reader confusion may add to the understanding of how grammar is involved in many miscues which

were usually considered simple graphic confusions. Early readers often confuse *said* with *and*. Both words occur frequently at similar pivotal points in sentences. When readers make such miscues their oral intonation is usually produced appropriately.

TEXT: "I will call Father," said Mother.

READER: I will call Father and Mother.

TEXT: Mary and John and Sally do not go to school yet.

READER: "Mary and John," said Sally. "Do not go to school yet."

It is significant that the readers who produced miscues like the ones cited above did not make the same kind of miscues when they were provided with a story including similar sentences but with a more involved plot which clarified who was speaking and what was happening. The more information readers have about what they are reading the easier it is to understand.

If Not Skills What Then

We must treat written language as *language* and help readers do the same. Looking back at the points made earlier about oral language constraints in relation to comprehension, we can use similar written language experiences to plan reading instruction.

1. *Provide the readers with a rich environment of written language so that there are abundant language cues available for reading.* Saturate the classroom with a variety of written language such as books, magazines, comics, newspapers, recipes, directions for making things, charts, signs, books that are authored by the children, notes written by children, teachers and parents, letters from pen-pals or other important people. A good part of the reading period should be spent in silent, independent uninterrupted reading. Children should learn how to select their own reading materials and not rely on teacher selection. Learning to

swim is done by swimming in lakes, pools, rivers and oceans. Learning to drive is done by driving on mountain roads, highways, rural-one lane roads and busy city streets. Learning to read can only happen if the reader has many experiences reading all kinds of written language.

In addition to doing a lot of reading, children should be read to a great deal. With tape recorders and listening posts available children have the opportunity to listen to all kinds of stories. Teachers should also read to children and rediscover the lost art of storytelling. Children exposed to a variety of linguistic styles and context through their ears are more likely to be able to predict such structures when they appear in their own reading.

2. *The content of the written language is familiar to the children and they know the limits or constraints of what will or will not be appropriate in that environment.*

When charts, labels and directions are written for the classroom, children should be involved in the process. Children could help develop charts listing the rules and regulations for classroom management. This should be written by the teacher in front of the children. When a decision is reached, the children can dictate the appropriate sentences so the written form is similar to their own language structures. These can be reread frequently when appropriate to decide who is going to do what, or where different students will be. At the end of a work period these can be reread for purposes of evaluation and to plan the subsequent activities.

When fish tanks, animal cages or plants are going to be part of the classroom, the children should be involved in actively building the necessary structures and dictating or writing signs, rules for their care, etc. These should also become reading materials for the children on future days to show visitors what has been done or to re-

examine or re-discuss the experiences to examine what is happening to the animals or plants. Once a week the children can write a short newsletter about their week's experiences, read the paper to each other and then take them home to read to their parents.

When students show a special enjoyment for certain kinds of written material, they should be encouraged to write their own stories using similar patterns. Songs and rhymes are good subjects for such experiences. Writing supports and enhances reading.

When children are to read social studies, science, math or other content area materials, the teacher must know the children are familiar with the content or provide the children with many non-reading concrete experiences with the particular concepts to be presented in the material prior to their reading. Meanings change depending on the content or field being discussed. For example, *Let's look at the problem* means widely different things depending on whether you are reading about classroom behavior, mathematics or English literature. *Is that a set?* will have varied meanings and answers depending on whether the written material is concerned with mathematics, dentistry, furniture or jewelry.

3. *Children know that they themselves must understand or comprehend the message.* Reading is a receptive process. It goes on inside a reader's head. We all know when we are understanding what we are reading. We must help children develop their own sense of "Am I understanding?" Too many children are willing to read for the teacher looking up frequently for a smile or a nod to know that everything is o.k. We must help readers rely more on knowing that *they* comprehend. They must know that reading is for themselves or they will never become readers.

Since reading is receptive it is important to help students realize that it is not necessary to know the pronuncia-

tion or to be able to pronounce every word as one reads. All readers have many words in their reading vocabulary which they have never heard or spoken and are unsure of their pronunciation. Readers should be encouraged to continue reading even when they come to unknown words and phrases and not to rely on the teacher or another student for the oral pronunciation. Teachers should help students realize that if they continue reading through to the end of the material, they may be able to understand the meaning of an unfamiliar word, phrase or sentence even if they cannot pronounce it. *Understanding is the most important aspect of reading, far more important than learning to pronounce words.* Students need to be encouraged to guess at meanings. The greater the context and the closer the content is to the experiences of the reader the more appropriate a reader's guess will be. Reading involves this kind of risk taking all the time.

Readers are able to provide meanings for many concepts such as *transom, typical, live, experiment, chemistry* and *fawn* even though they were unable to pronounce such words appropriately as they read them orally. (Goodman and Burke, 1973) On the other hand, there are students who can pronounce such words appropriately but they do not necessarily understand the concepts.

Reading instruction should help students focus on comprehension by using open ended discussion questions about the material that is being read rather than focusing students' attention on minutia. If readers' opinions, interpretations or points of view are treated with respect they will want to discuss what they've read with others. Questions such as Did you like _____? (a main character) Why or why not? Would you like to have such a person as a friend? What was the problem in this story? Did you agree with the way the author solved the problem? What other ways could it have been solved?

Why do you think the author wanted to write this story? What was the author's bias or point of view in writing this? Do you agree?

These type of questions can help students realize that reading is for themselves not just an assignment to prepare for a teacher which has a specified right answer.

If we keep in mind that reading does not exist without comprehension than we can drop the word comprehension from the phrase reading comprehension. The two word phrase is unnecessary and redundant. Therefore, let's focus all of our instructional efforts on *reading*.

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