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READING TO LEARN — A QUEST FOR COMPREHENSION

by **Kenneth L. Carlson**

School reading programs have been developed on a two-fold premise. First a child learns to read, and then he reads to learn. Learning to read seems difficult in itself, but most children accomplish this goal sooner or later. Reading to learn however, is a lifelong endeavor. It is complex and continuous. The problems of mastery are diffuse. The basic problem is something called "comprehension."

Teachers have long been concerned about the difficulty many pupils have in achieving adequate comprehension skills. Students often are able to read material orally but seemingly cannot comprehend this same material. Other pupils seem to be able to read and comprehend grade level material in their basal readers, but they appear to lack the skill to read and comprehend subject matter texts for the same grade level.

Russell (4) points out that comprehension is not a simple, unitary thing but a hierarchy of cognitive skills. This hierarchy is often considered by reading teachers to have the following developmental sequence:

- a. Literal Comprehension Skills
- b. Interpretative Skills
- c. Critical Reading Skills

Dechant (2) emphasizes that comprehension begins with the association of an experience with a given symbol. He continues:

Meaningful reading includes not only a literal interpretation of an author's words but also an interpretation of his mood, tone, feeling, and attitude. The reader must comprehend the implied meanings and prejudices of the writer (p. 353).

Thus, comprehension may be described as a matching of the reader's experience with the author's experience so that understanding is attained. The print, sentence structure, and punctuation must be decoded by the reader for such understanding to be achieved. Since most students have considerable difficulty in attaining adequate comprehension rapidly, it is logical to assume that comprehension for many pupils consists of sampling the material to be read. One might say they read selectively.

Such reading might allow students to gain a fairly good understanding of *literature type* material but is not conducive to understanding and interpreting the complexities of subject matter texts. Heilman (3) points out that reading content area material requires a far greater breadth of experiences, vocabulary, and con-

cepts than reading the basal reader. He emphasizes that many textbooks may be excellent and accurate resources but too difficult for many readers because they demand highly sophisticated reading skills. The social studies book is loaded with so many concepts that a sampling method of reading permits the student to gain only a partial understanding. The science and mathematics books are also filled with extremely complex material and are not easily interpreted. Only when the reading is most precise can subject matter be read. Of course, if the reader lacks needed experiential background, then reading subject matter materials with understanding is almost impossible.

At the 1968 Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Bormuth (1) reported a series of studies that point out the ineffectiveness of instruction in reading comprehension. He writes:

Specifically, it appears doubtful that most elementary and junior high school students can learn much, if anything, from their instructional materials.

Many teachers may be astonished by this statement. However, veteran teachers who have been concerned with teaching comprehension skills will not be shocked. They know too well that most pupils cannot acquire much knowledge from their subject matter texts. Bormuth (1) continues:

An important fact stands out in these results. Children normally do not achieve enough comprehension skill to read even the simplest instruc-

tional material until they have reached the sixth month of the seventh grade. Bear in mind the simplest materials (in these studies) were drawn from the materials in grades one through three.

The studies which Bormuth reported would seem to point out that many of the current practices used in teaching comprehension are ineffective. Perhaps the basal reader which educators have considered the primary instrument for teaching reading is not the best tool for reading instruction after all.

References

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