If They Don't Read Much, How They Ever Gonna Get Good?

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Richard L. Allington

To help children who have difficulty developing fluent reading ability, educators have developed **remedial** and **corrective reading** classes and a host of training programs, materials and techniques to use in them. However, even with these intervention processes and strategies, **many poor readers remain poor readers**.

Research continues to explore the etiology of the disability and also focuses on determining the effectiveness of the various intervention processes and strategies. While investigations of both types are valuable, it may also be fruitful to explore other facets of **remedial and corrective instruction of reading**.

It is particularly interesting to look at **whether teachers have confused the means of reading instruction with the end of fluent reading**. For instance, a recent informal survey which counted the number of words read in context by students during the course of their lessons showed that during remedial and corrective reading instruction, **the students were doing very little reading.**

(No claim is made that the sample was randomly selected, nor were rigidly constructed instruments used to collect the data. Rather, several remedial reading sessions were visited and served as unwitting participants, as did several classroom teachers who were working with their poorest readers in small group instruction.) The remarkable result was that **the total number of words read in context by each individual was surprisingly small** and the range was likewise surprisingly narrow. No student read more than 110 words in context and none read less than twenty-four. A mean of forty-three words was read in context by each student.

It is not being suggested that either the students or the teachers were shirking their duties. In fact, both the students and the teachers were busily engaged in a variety of activities throughout the sessions observed. The point is that **while a myriad of instructional techniques and materials were employed, little reading was accomplished.**

Perhaps reading is not the focus of remedial and corrective instruction in reading—in fact that is the logical conclusion based upon the above observations. However, what seemed to be happening was that **isolated skills instruction had become the primary focus of these lessons.**

The Case for Reading

It seems strange that an argument must be made for increased reading in remedial and corrective reading instruction. However, the recent trend throughout the educational system to depict learning as a hierarchical series of small steps has run amuck. Learning, but particularly learning to read, has been presented in a variety of skills-based formats, but it seems that **the poorest readers receive the heaviest doses of skills instruction**. Skills instruction is not inherently bad but it is argued that

skills are not enough (Conklin, 1973; Allington, 1975a). In fact, **when reading takes a back seat to skills instruction**, one has to ask the age old question about the cart and the horse.

It should seem clear to anyone who examines the issue that reading is not responding to flashcards, nor is it filling in blanks, marking vowel values, or responding to graphemes presented in isolation. Reading ability is not necessarily facilitated by nor does it necessarily require the ability to perform the above acts. **To develop the ability to read fluently requires the opportunity to read**—a simple rule of thumb.

If, in a typical week of reading instruction, students only encounter 150 to 500 words in context one has to ask: **How they ever gonna get good**?

Steps Toward a Solution

A first step for the teacher concerned with developing better readers is to assess the amount of reading in context required or presented, particularly in remedial or corrective instruction. There can be no hard and fast rule for the minimum, ideal, or optimum amount of reading which should be provided. However, if one wants to approach the problem conservatively, a goal of perhaps 500 words a lesson per student might be a starting point. Thus, if the student(s) read extremely slowly, this amount would result in about twenty minutes of reading. Few students, though, consistently read at a rate of 2.5 seconds per word, or twenty-five words per minute. Poor readers often do function at fifty words per minute in unfamiliar material, and using the 500-word minimum would then take about ten minutes of the instructional session. Surprisingly **few poor readers remain at such slow rates when given the opportunity to practice reading in context daily.**

A second procedure is profoundly simple but often tremendously difficult to implement. It is simply: **Leave the reader alone**. Do not interrupt with constant admonitions to “sound it out” or “look at that word again.” This allows the reader to get more read and at the same time forces the development of independent reading and correction strategies necessary for effective reading.

Probably no other act is more difficult for the teacher of reading. There seems to be a hereditary mechanism which is triggered when a student misreads, a mechanism that can be suppressed only with much conscious effort. But suppressed it must be if one wishes to develop **readers who function effectively and independently**.

The only query that may be useful is “Did that make sense?” and then only at the end of a sentence or selection. **Generally, readers are better off when left alone**. The teacher should simply collect data about the students’ reading habits. Without interruption by the teacher, particularly mini-lessons in word analysis which disrupt the flow of meaning, the reader can get on with the task at hand—reading.

Another procedure is to keep a chart of the number of words read in context per session and also the number of words read per minute by the students. The first attempts can serve as benchmarks for progress in both areas. The charts also serve as a

reminder that the goal of remedial and corrective reading instruction is developing students who read.

If one accepts these procedures there is bound to be a shift in the emphasis of remedial and corrective reading lessons. However, the teacher may wish to extend the emphasis on reading in context. The following strategies can serve as a basis for developing more fluent readers from those students whose achievement is lagging.

Teaching Strategies

The first strategy works particularly well in remedial sessions. It has been called the "auditory impress" method (Fry, 1972), though that label seems a bit pretentious for a simple read-along-together technique. A teacher, or fluent reader, and the student simply **read orally and in unison an identical passage**. The teacher takes care to read with a smooth but effective expression. Typically the student has pre-read the passage silently, developing an awareness of context. A recent monograph (Daly, Neville, and Pugh, 1975) reviews research and instructional practice that follow this general strategy. It is not necessary that the teacher always read live; taped recordings seem to work nearly as well though **some of the rapport available in the personal contact is lost**. In any event, reading along, either orally or silently, is an effective strategy for providing experience in reading in context, particularly for those students who seem largely unable to function independently in this mode.

A second strategy is **multiple readings of a material**. Dahl (1974) reports using this technique in an experimental setting with unexpectedly good results. Engleman and others (1974) also suggest the multiple readings but place the focus on word identification accuracy in a passage designed to present low contextual richness and using words that are highly similar graphically. This **heavy emphasis on word identification accuracy can defeat the purpose and indeed negate the most beneficial effects of the multiple readings strategy—increased fluency**.

Consider, for a moment, the plight of **poor readers**. It seems **they are never placed in material which they can read fluently**. Instead, more difficult material always awaits each bit of progress. One effect then is that poor readers seldom have the opportunity to develop traits associated with good reading, particularly fluent and rapid oral reading. Poor readers **continue to stumble along one word at a time, seldom phrasing appropriately** or using the word prediction skills (Smith, 1975) necessary for fluent reading. Instead, poor readers identify one word at a time, which results in a slow, choppy style.

The multiple readings strategy allows the poor reader the opportunity to break out of this mold. By rereading a selection several times, the student **begins to develop fluency**. Experience demonstrates that there is a carry-over effect to other reading in addition to a variety of affective gains. One particularly effective demonstration of the gain is to **tape a first reading and then tape later readings for comparison**.

The multiple readings strategy may remind us of the way many early readers

begin—**mastering one story or book and then reading or rereading it to anyone who will listen**. Similarly, many poor readers who have been involved in the multiple readings practice will attempt to corner anyone who will listen, from infant siblings to janitors, or visitors to the classroom or clinic.

A final strategy was originally designed for whole school or classroom application but when these large-scale implementations are not possible, it can be easily adapted to small group or remedial situations. The **Sustained Silent Reading** approach has had a number of advocates (Hunt, 1970; McCracken, 1971; Towner and Evans, 1975; Allington, 1975b) and has been applied in a variety of educational institutions. Basically the technique is as simple as the others presented. Students are given a **regular fixed period of time to read self-selected material silently**. The teacher, who also reads, serves as a model, much as parents do for many early readers. Again the underlying philosophy is that **the best way to develop reading ability is to provide abundant opportunity for experiencing reading**.

Few can learn to do anything well without the opportunity to engage in whatever is being learned. Too often the procedures commonly employed in remedial and corrective reading instruction seem to mitigate against developing reading ability by **focusing more on the mastery of isolated skills with relatively little emphasis on or instructional time devoted to reading in context**. To become a proficient reader **one needs the opportunity to read**. Adopting the procedures and strategies suggested is a beginning step in shifting the emphasis of remedial and corrective reading instruction from the means to the end.

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