

วารสาร "มนุษยศาสตร์ปริทรรศน์"

ปีที่ ๑ ฉบับที่ ๒ ธันวาคม ๒๕๒๒

ON ORAL READING IN TESOL

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Children do not need instruction to learn how to read, nor teachers need instruction to teach reading. It is through enlightenment that children learn best, by being allowed a chance to understand what is going on, and it is through enlightenment that teachers teach best, by understanding the reading process. Ignorance about the reading process is by far the greatest limitation on reading and learning to read.

Frank Smith (1972 : 57)

I. What Reading Is Not

Why Dang (or little Johnny, if you wish) can't read? The answer is, to my mind, centered around our ignorance of what reading is, and yet we have to teach it!

To begin with, it may be helpful to define reading by pointing out what it is **not**. Put simply then, reading is not to be considered as a process of "decoding writing to sound."

This said, we must now have a look at just what we mean by "reading." This is a question which cannot be answered in one sentence, or even a paragraph. However, for our purposes here I shall try to define in a few words what I think reading is.

Reading is the cognitive act of understanding language. It is a very complex mental process of getting the meaning or meanings, by mapping **deep structure onto surface structure**.

Thus reading-- or more precisely, fluent reading -- is much more than a skill of manipulating the printed page; it is rather a process of identification of meaning or meanings from the previously learned linguistic symbols. What reading involves is "decoding to meaning," not "decoding to sound."

The point I have to make about "decoding to meaning" is that a child can and generally does learn to read without using phonic rules as Smith (1972: 46) aptly puts: "Children learn phonics through reading, they do not learn to read through phonics." For example, we all know very well that the first words a child reads like --**mummy** and **daddy**-- are learned long before he recognizes that **m** stands for /m/ and **d** /d/. In other words, children learn that **m** is pronounced /m/ because they know that /m/ is the initial sound of words like **mummy** and **milk** that start with **m**.

II. A Look At Oral Reading

In order to understand what reading is it may be helpful to look at non-native readers' miscues or misread words in their oral reading. The following is the transcription of oral reading of two ESOL learners who read the same passage.

Carmen is a Spanish-speaking girl in grade three. Adisorn is a Thai boy who went to school in Canada for one year and has been studying English in a Thai school for two years now. In the transcripts, the children's miscues are enclosed in boxes and their departure from the text each time was transcribed directly above the original word. The transcripts are presented in Figures 1 and 2 below:

theenk go duh wid heez friend
 I think he goes to the store with his mother.
 eef today
 Ask her if he can stay home this time. Then
he con ged duh houz stored theeng
 we can get the clubhouse started first thing
maybe
 Monday.

Fig. 1: Transcript of Carmen's Oral Reading (Masland 1979: 251).

sink go də sətoe wid ma : tsə
 I think he goes to the store with his mother.
 dis den
 Ask her if he can stay home this time. Then
 də cup sink
 we can get the clubhouse started first thing
 Monday.

Fig. 2: Transcript of Adisorn's Oral Reading.

At first glance, it looks as if the two children said words that do not appear on the page. A closer look at the transcription reveals that Carmen pronounced **think**, **with**, and **if** according to the sound system of her home language, which is Spanish. In Adisorn's oral reading, his pronunciation of **think**, **store**, **mother**, and **then**, is considered very typical for Thai-speaking children who are learning English.

It should be emphasized at this point that these changes of pronunciation have not affected Carmen and Adisorn's comprehension of the words. That is to say, the ESOL reader's mispronunciation does not interfere with his comprehension. Therefore, do not try to teach "correct" pronunciation under the guise of oral reading. The main objective of reading instruction is full comprehension, **not** accurate pronunciation. Children whose speech is constantly corrected during oral reading will become hostile to and turn away from learning to read and the enjoyment of reading.

In this connection, I want to make the point that the teacher's response to the student's miscues would depend on the extent to which they affected his reading comprehension. If, for example, Carmen and Adisorn's miscues significantly altered their understanding of the text, the teacher would need to help them get the right meaning.

III. Reading Instruction vs. Learning to Read

How do children learn to read? A child, as you will see, can only learn to read by reading. It is through reading that he learns to identify words and meanings.

Here is a very simple demonstration. If a child comes across some unknown words in reading like "Jack and Jill went up the h....," or "This is the h.... that Jack built," he almost certainly can identify from context both the missing words and their meanings. Thus only by reading can a child discover this linguistic mystery.

This fact, that learning to read is best achieved by reading, is very important. It has an implication for a reading teacher, i.e. that the teacher needs an insight into the reading process and the process of learning to read if he wishes to make all the difference in children's success in and through reading.

However, in most reading instruction, this is not always the case. A child is usually taught and not given a chance to learn to read. And the amount of

time children spend actually reading in the average class is only four minutes (Smith 1972). Indeed, formal reading instruction as such is more of a hindrance than a help!

The statement I want to make here is that in learning to read a child himself does most of the work of learning, and that formal instruction has only a small part to play in the learning process.

My emphasis on "learning to read by reading" brings me to another important point that I want to make, i.e. that reading instruction should be made as easy and enjoyable as possible for children. You and I would agree that reading in ESOL is often a laborious task. The reading material is generally overloaded with unfamiliar information, so much so that very little comprehension results. It is not surprising, therefore, that so few ESOL students learn to read.

All in all, my message for reading instruction is simply this: Let the student learn to read by himself. I believe that what the student needs in learning to read is an easy and enjoyable reading material. The experience of being able to read easily and enjoyably gives him a sense of success. It encourages him and makes him feel that he is able to read English satisfactorily.

Finally, all I have said above, perhaps best summed up in three words:
Read, Dang, Read!

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