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FLUENT READING IN TEN EASY LESSONS

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This paper describes a teaching technique well suited to encouraging older children with poor reading ability to attack reading with interest and purpose. The strength of this method lies in the fact that it is based upon sound theory and can be implemented without too much trouble. Children enjoy it, and reading can come alive to a child for the first time in his school career.

THE THEORETICAL STARTING POINT

Reading is not a passive process like watching television. When we read we do not gaze at the page and soak up meaning. We think about what we are reading and construct meaning from the hundreds of cues that we find in the page. How well we read depends upon both how efficiently we decode, and how cleverly we piece together the meaning. It is a two step process: decoding, followed by the construction of meaning. These two facets are interdependent. Making meaning can only take place after decoding, and decoding is greatly facilitated by the reader's understanding.

Reading for meaning is an ongoing purposeful process which involves constant prediction, reflection, and judgment. When we teach children to read, we tend to spend little time on these specific skills, and rely rather on providing plenty of instruction in decoding, and plenty of practice whereby the children can develop reading for meaning alone. This is not bad teaching. It is necessary because the construction of meaning is something which the child must do for himself. In a sense, reading for meaning must be learnt, but cannot be taught. The essential, intricate internal organization and interpretation of information requires independent work on the part of the reader.

It seems that many Aboriginal children never learn this active, meaningful reading. They learn to decode the words they see, but they develop very few skills for building up meaning from what they have decoded. The reason for this is discussed elsewhere (e.g. Christie, 1982). This paper describes a technique whereby, in order to give a child maximum opportunity to develop skills in reading for

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meaning, the work of decoding is minimized and the child can focus on understanding. The work of decoding is minimized by having the child learn a book by heart, and the focus is placed on meaning by having the child practise fluent oral reading of the book with emphasis on intonation and rhythm, before reading the book to his teacher, his classmates, and a group of infant children.

THE MILINGIMBI EXAMPLE

Max is the teacher of a class of post primary children who were not noted for their academic ability. He had allowed me to do research in his classroom several times, and most of the children I had taught in previous years. One day, after havind read an article by Carol Chomsky called *After Decoding: What?* I asked Max to let me try this method with eight of his children. We chose the children on the basis of their average-to-good school attendance record, and their poor-to-very-poor reading ability. (Average age = 13 years, average sight vocabulary = 30 words). I was to take these children for an hour a day first thing in the morning.

On the first day we went off to a carpeted area in the library. I tried, without much success, to get a discussion going on reading and learning to read. It was very much a one-sided discussion and ended up with me explaining to them carefully and slowly, four essential things about the group:

1. That the purpose of the group was to help them to read better.
2. That they had been chosen because, compared with the other children, their reading was not very good.
3. That they had been chosen because they came to school regularly and were good workers, and
4. That if they didn't want to be in the group they could go back to Max's class any time they wanted .

I explained these points carefully, and continued to explain them during the following weeks, in an attempt to increase their feeling of personal control of reading, and personal responsibility for success and failure.

Next I showed the children eight books (in English) which had been chosen carefully for them to learn. The criteria of choice had been that they be interesting, relatively short, and with language and content readily understood by Aboriginal children. I told them that some of the infant teachers wanted post primary children to read

stories to their young children and that I wanted them, over the next few days, to teach themselves to read their books fluently, from cover to cover, with the aid of a tape and tape recorder.

I read all the books to the children and they chose one each. Each child was given a tape recorder with headphones, and a recording of their story which had been prepared the night before. The tape recordings were a slowish rendition of the story, with rather exaggerated pauses and intonation. There was a little music, and a few sound effects in the background, and two different voices representing different characters.

I told the children to go off and listen to the story a few times and to practise reading along with the tape. I tried to point out to them that it was up to them to learn to read the story, but if they needed any help they could come to me and I would work with them.

Each day's lesson was supposed to be one hour, but usually, after a late start, the children worked for 40 minutes, which was long enough. At first they would bring the book up to me each time they had listened to the story through once. I would read it through with them, encouraging them as much as possible, but also making it quite clear to them how much work there was to be done to get it fluent. It occurred to me that very seldom in an Aboriginal child's schooling is he given complete personal responsibility to work on an academic task over a period of several days and by his own efforts, to bring it up to a satisfactory level.

I could tell, by the way in which each child worked, whether or not he realised that it was solely his responsibility to get the work done. One girl would read her book with me, then sit down and read a magazine or wander outside and then bring the book back, thrust it at me and say 'bilin' ('finished'), as if by some mysterious latent learning process, she had improved in the interim. I wouldn't tell her to go away and do some work, but rather got her to read to me again. We would agree that it still wasn't very good, agree on some specific points for attention, and off she would go again.

Most of the children settled down quickly and really enjoyed the work. The first and most difficult thing they had to learn was that, ultimately, success or failure depended upon them, and all my interactions with them were aimed at reinforcing this idea. It is true, of course, that all classroom learning depends largely on the personal efforts of the child, but that is often not clear to them.

The main role of the teacher turned out to be talking with (or more often, to) the children individually, helping them to evaluate their own progress and make short term goals for them to work on alone. I didn't have much success getting them to verbalize their own feelings of progress - they are so dependent on evaluation from the teacher, but between the two of us, we would make some judgment about progress, decide quite specifically what the present weaknesses were, and then decide on a plan of action for the next session of independent work.

At any time in the room, maybe four or five of the children would be working through their books on the tape, and maybe two or three would be working on a related activity. Each child took between three days and a week to learn his book. They got very excited about reading to the younger children and this had a strong motivating effect. When a book was ready for presentation, the child would read it first to his classmates, and then to the infant group. We practised presentation - like how to hold the book so that the children could see the pictures, and how to wait until everybody was listening. After the children had read their books to the younger ones, they were keen and able to start on a new one.

SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIVITIES AND TECHNIQUES

1. *Personal tape recordings*: Sometimes, if I felt a child had no critical feeling for his own progress, I would send him off by himself to make a tape recording of his own reading. This, somewhat to his embarrassment, we would listen to together. It proved a powerful way of providing feedback to the children unused to evaluating their own work.

2. *Flash cards*: If a child had been working on a book for several days and there were still a few words that he didn't know, I made him a few flash cards (never more than five or six). We went through these before and after we read the story. A good way to learn hard words is to type them out on a typewriter, and these children were allowed to do this. If there is no typewriter, copying the hard words or sentences by hand helps the children to look carefully at the component parts.

3. *Reading to each other*. Most mornings, when we were warming up, I'd get a child whose book was learnt pretty thoroughly, to read to the rest of the group. This takes rather a lot of nerve and a few new skills, like holding the book so the others can see the pictures. Sometimes, when some children were able to read independently of the tape, I would send them outside in pairs for ten minutes to read to each other. Some children, of course, are better at

supervising themselves than others. If I could see that they weren't concentrating, I would call them back inside and they could work together in the classroom.

4. *"Homework"*: I made a photocopy of each child's book and stapled it together with a cardboard cover for him to take home. Some of them, I'm sure, never even arrived home, but some children did actually practise them at home and came back improved each morning. This homework did a lot to fire their motivation, as well as to improve their reading. Once again, this technique was aimed at increasing the child's feeling of personal responsibility in learning to read, and was very successful.

5. *Phrasing*: One of the worst problems with the actual reading was that the children read word by word, with no phrasing. Initially they do this because they are concentrating on decoding and largely ignoring meaning, but as the book becomes familiar, the stultified intonation and phrasing remains. (This is especially a problem with Aboriginal children who are learning English as a second language.) I began to draw pencil brackets underneath the text to mark the phrases which were read haltingly and we practised reading together with exaggerated phrasing.

A WORD ON PERSONAL CONTROL

A major emphasis in this technique is for the teacher to maximise the child's personal control of the entire process. Quite apart from the fact that this is a wise principle in many learning situations, it is especially important here because we are teaching reading for meaning - that aspect of the reading process least accessible to the directives of a teacher. This caused a few problems.

First, it was difficult to leave them to decide for themselves when they wanted help from me. At first they all came up to me each time they had finished listening to the story, I think half expecting me to make a pronouncement that they were finished. It came as rather a shock to them when I asked them how well they thought they were doing themselves and the ball remained in their court.

Others were inclined to think that, after they had read their book through once, it was their job to sit around quietly chatting, reading magazines, and waiting for their next instructions. This is understandable, because children are expected to behave like this in most classroom situations. So the teacher's major task turned out to be fostering this feeling of personal control. We realised that the work they were doing was pretty demanding, and that everyone

needs a rest, especially if you're listening to the same story over and over. If a child were obviously lazing rather than resting, we would talk to him about it, but generally we tried to give him as much freedom as possible.

Striking the correct balance between teacher intervention and children's autonomy is the teacher's main problem, and the success of the method depends on this.

THE RESULTS

In the time that I took the group, I lost one pupil. She suddenly gave up and said she wanted to go back to the other class. Later I realised that the book I had given her, although quite attractive to me, was mindlessly boring to her, and that may have been responsible. The children seemed unwilling to complain about the books they were working on, and unable to change their minds once they had started. All the other children learnt several books. After their first classroom performance their enthusiasm increased. Max, who had been teaching the children all year, made the following comments: They very much looked forward to reading to the infant classes, and did so very proudly and usually pretty well. Also, the most dramatic changes he noted were in the children's approach to the reading matter. It was as if it had suddenly dawned on the children that reading was meaningful, and they began reading with some semblance of phrasing, intonation and expression. Their enthusiasm for reading increased noticeably.

No formal evaluation was made of the success of the program. Chomsky found that the children she worked with made significant gains on four standardized reading tests after 4 months of 20 minutes a day. She also noted that children who had previously been frightened of reading became interested in trying to read anything they could lay their hands on. Max added that it would be impossible to teach slow post-primary children to read using this method alone. The actual processes of decoding also need to be taught formally.

Other teachers all commented favourably about the program. The one consistent worry was the time involved in preparing tapes. This does take time, but we enjoyed ourselves choosing books and making ten tapes in a little over two hours. These ten tapes were swapped around among the children for several weeks. Another problem is finding eight cassette players, all working, with earphones, and facilities to have them all plugged into a power source at the same time. Admittedly, that would tax any teacher's resources.

Another teacher was unconvinced that learning books fluently would actually make a difference to a child's ability to tackle new material. How well would the learnings transfer? The answer, I think, is that what the child was learning was not *how to read* so much as *what reading is*, and *I can read*, and *reading is fun*, and *I've actually learnt to read a whole book*, and *those little kids want to hear me*. All these learnings have an indirect but strong bearing upon the child's ultimate motivation and ability to learn decoding skills.

THE SPECIAL FEATURES OF THIS METHOD

In terms of teaching Aboriginal children, this approach seems to have four primary advantages:

1. It suits traditional Aboriginal learning styles. The children are learning to read a book as a meaningful whole, rather than working on unrelated pieces of material. They do this through a process of successive approximations towards the efficient end product.
2. It forces the children to take personal control of the learning situation. They really have to figure out a way of learning this book themselves. When personal control is high, the motivating value of success is proportionately high.
3. It involves working towards a worthwhile, accessible and short term goal. The general goal of "learning to read" is so large and abstract to Aboriginal children that they can hardly be expected to identify with it. But the simple and obvious goal of learning to read properly a particular book of one's choice is both worthwhile and attainable.
4. Instead of focussing on decoding, it focusses on meaning, where the real problems of Aboriginal children's reading lie.

A SUMMARY OF THE TECHNIQUE

Decoding is de-emphasised, and meaning is emphasised, so the child practises a single book until he is fluent, with the intention of reading it to a group of infant children. Each child learns a different book.

The book is short, easy to read and understand, with a definite story line. Poems, songs and theme books were unpopular.

Each child is independently responsible for learning. He has a copy of his book, a tape recording of the book read slowly but fluently, and a cassette player. He works in his own time, and through his own methods.

Ideally, the teacher assists only when requested. The main teacher role is to help the children see their own progress towards the goal, and to accept personal control of that progress. There is a variety of supplementary techniques which can be useful if they don't detract from the primary activity.

When the child has reached fluency in a book, he has often achieved a unique goal. He is a fluent reader (maybe the *only* one in the class) of a book he likes. He is in the powerful position of being able to read it to other children, and maybe he has, for the first time, experienced setting a meaningful learning goal, working towards it, and achieving it.

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