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EFFICIENCY IN READING

By D. ZWARENSTEIN

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READING is communication—a two-way process between author and reader in which responsibility is shared. On the author's shoulders rests the responsibility for creation of atmosphere, clarity of statement, support for his argument, and above all, regard for and anticipation of, the reader's reaction. The reader, too, has a part to play. No passive listener this, sponge-like absorbing all until he falls asleep, overcome by the burden of words without meaning.

As he follows the conversation in print, the telling of the story, or the intricacies of technical explanation, his mind is actively engaged in assessing, weighing up, mentally arguing or agreeing with what has been expressed. He lives the story as one of the characters, or together with the author observes critically the behaviour of people in a particular setting; or, in study reading, visualises the examples, the explanations which support a given theory, weighing them against his own experience.

But this he can do only if his mind is free to see overall meaning, free from the business of "saying" and deciphering each word, and free from the necessity of unravelling a clutter of seemingly unrelated facts.

Because reading as a form of communication is not fully appreciated in our schools, efficient readers are a rarity. There is a need for re-orientation of views and methods of teaching reading at all levels in education.

Beginning Stages:

In the grades classes, reading should arise naturally from the children's experience and environment just as conversation does within the family group, for reading is conversation in print. Writing as the other facet of the reading process should be developed as a means of communication in the same way.

The whole sentence must express a whole idea, whether it is written or read. This must be the basis. There can only be one approach to reading—the interpretation of an idea!

The small child seeks his own clues. He guesses intelligently from the context or the picture and, in a manner similar to that of an adult who meets a new word or concept and looks at the context and structure of the material. He delves into his previous experience for assistance in interpreting the printed words.

Phonics, look-and-say, word families, are important aids to reading; means whereby we can be helped to get meaning from the printed page, but they are not the aim of reading. There are many systems of word identification and analysis and there exists a "tendency in some quarters to neglect the thought-getting purpose of reading in favour of the mechanics of analyzing word forms."(1) This tendency is, unfortunately, still very prevalent in our schools.

The Primary School:

Generally speaking, after the initial mechanics of reading have been taught in the grades, there is very little reading instruction. True, the pupils are given books, and some little time is spent on word drills, spelling, and often quite unrelated language lessons, but there is little instruction in the art and science of reading itself.

> "... while the ability to read intelligently will have a profound effect on all other activity, this vital training is only scientifically developed in the lower primary schools and thereafter the ability to read is quite erroneously taken for granted."(7)

Little is seen of suiting the reading material to the need of the child. This affects the brighter pupil as well as the slower. Boredom, the basis of distraction, can be as great a deterrent to progress in reading as sheer inability to follow the "lesson" owing to lack of fundamental techniques.

Unfortunately, many teachers are satisfied if the pupil makes some progress, and are not concerned with whether he is reading as well as he can, to his "capacity" both as regards the difficulty of the material and the scope or range of interest.

The High School:

The abortive attempt to teach literary appreciation and creative writing to pupils who have inadequate *reading* skills is well known.

The emphasis shifts to literature, but paradoxically away from the nature of reading itself. Pupils may gain much from hearing the teacher's explanations and guides, but the need for instruction in reading is as great as ever.

Apart from the appreciation of literature itself, the pupil needs to learn how to appreciate the structure of reading material generally, the means whereby the author should support, elaborate, explain and illustrate his ideas. He needs to know the construction of words and the construction of sentences and paragraphs as related to the expression of ideas in reading as well as in composition.

He must learn to seek through these a clearer definition of the author's intention.

It is probable that most people who pass out of high school, and even University, never again read at the level demanded previously. And the great mass of literature poured out daily, caters for this lower level.

"... Newspaper reporters, magazine writers, popular novelists, authors of text books and 'popular' non-fiction works, all assume (necessarily) that the great reading public is made up of people who want to be instructed without pain, cost, or obligation. They want what they read to be custom-made for them. It must contain no words they do not understand, no allusions to anything they have not permanently learned in high school, no ideas that force them to do some serious thinking."(2)

University Reading: Wastage of student potential

At University level, lecturers in almost every subject complain of low standards and hold up their hands in horror at the students' inability to express their thoughts in written form. The students, on the other hand, bemoan the inadequacy of their reading abilities. "I can't get through the main text books, never mind the supplementary reading," is heard all too frequently. Lectures are not enough, even when the students have some knowledge of how to take adequate notes, but they are given little guidance on how to study and, despairing of ultimate success, give up the struggle.

Reading and Commerce: Demands of modern business methods

The growing demand for greater efficiency in reading is being felt in the commercial world too. Modern business methods need stream-lined reading and writing as a means of communication. Moreover, business executives, champing against the lack of time and the difficulty of keeping abreast of development in particular fields, find no time to relax and are depressed by the constant worry of unfinished work.

The American Scene: Growth of Efficiency Courses

Commonly referred to as Speed Reading, Rapid Reading, or Faster Reading, reading efficiency courses have been known for almost thirty years. (They began at Teachers' College, Columbia University about 1935. Many more sprang up after World War II.) Today many of the leading Universities have departments for the Improvement of Reading allied either to the Education or the English Department. Some of these have developed Reading Institutes, Reading Laboratories or Reading Clinics. The last-mentioned have, in many cases, grown from the work in remedial reading, which attempts to overcome specific difficulties in reading. Independent institutes have also grown from the demands of the world of commerce. Most of these organizations offer courses in Rapid Reading, some to students only, and some to all who are interested. Results of research in the institutes and departments led to the adoption of reading as a subject in many high schools, i.e. the skills of reading as distinct from the literary reading usually associated with high school work.

Ruth Strang reports on some of the work that has been done:

"In college, as in high school, instruction may be given as an intrinsic part of the freshman programme, on a par with other subjects. Everyone takes it. Classes are sectioned according to the student's initial reading ability. Reading instruction may also be offered as a service on a non-credit basis to any students who want to take advantage of it. Or it may be required of all students who fall below a certain level on the reading test given at college entrance."(3)

It is apparent that most of the college courses arose initially from the inadequacy of student reading, from the apparent incidence of serious difficulties in the mechanics of reading itself. However,

"Very few of the students had serious difficulties in the mechanics of reading. Their problem was one of adjustment to college reading requirements. Many of them had been able to meet high school scholastic requirements with a minimum of reading, but when they entered college they were faced with an extremely difficult reading programme...."

"After they had worked a while in the reading group, their needs became more apparent. They needed a reorientation towards study in general, an appreciation of the value which reading might have for them personally, a recognition of the relation of the classics to present conditions. They needed to grasp the pattern of thought as they read and to take a creative interest in their reading rather than merely to cover one assignment after another."(4)

Harris describes how he successfully used a series of practice exercises for improving rate of reading as a laboratory exercise in educational psychology. Under his direction students brought and mounted their own selections of reading material. They prepared sets of questions on their material, and used these to test the comprehension of the material by the students during the sixteen practice sessions. Harris reported on the results as follows:

"Repetition of this experiment with several classes has shown that substantial improvement is the rule.... The median improvement was 96 words per minute, an improvement of 39 per cent. over

the beginning rate of 247 words per minute. Accuracy (i.e. comprehension) scores varied somewhat, but ended up as high as they were at the beginning. In the second and fifteenth practice sessions, approximately equivalent textbook selections were used. The total time spent was about three and a half hours, divided among the sixteen practice sessions. The rate of improvement obtained, considering the time spent, compares favourably with any of the methods of controlled reading. . . ."(5)

It would seem that there are as many methods as there are courses, and experts aver that practically all programmes seem to get results.

Adult Reading Courses have the same basis as College programmes but are designed to meet special needs.

"One of the institute's major activities nowadays is specialised training for business groups, often tailor-made to meet specific problems. A reading institute specialist spent six months recently working in Hollywood with several major studios. Other clients included the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a large investment bank (whose clerks handled 80,000 more cheques a day after training) and an engineers' association."(6)

The results obtained in these adult classes have been so startling that many people, including educationists, have been inclined to dismiss them as merely highly coloured advertisements.

The South African Scene:

However, work on similar projects in South Africa is revealing the same patterns.

Mobil Oil Southern Africa (Pty.) Ltd. has been initiating courses based on the Leader Courses of the Reading Laboratory, New York. Mr. R. H. Loxton, Employee Relations Manager, in charge of the courses in Southern Africa, states:

"Mobil in 1958 obtained this course purely for domestic purposes and, after some experience, realised the potential of this training. This realisation was reinforced by the steadily growing interest in the subject and after handling enquiries on an ad hoc basis for two years, formalised it in 1960 as a project with the aim of aiding commerce and education with the initial evaluation or the real worth of this training. This is being done with a view to its general adoption as it offers considerable potential for the development of the economy of the country as a whole.

"The above is a concise statement of our objectives and views. We have been proceeding quietly along these lines and are making steady progress towards the achievement of this objective. For the adult world we have been investigating its value through training a broad cross-section of top-level executives throughout the country. In the educational field we have motivated the University of Stellenbosch to conduct a scientific investigation into its value in the high school. At the University of Cape Town a similar study is being conducted among students. A similar study, but on a larger scale, will be started in the Federation, sponsored jointly by the Ministry of Education, the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and Mobil.

"The results and findings of these studies, both in the commercial and educational world, will be publisned and distributed in these respective fields by Mobil. We anticipate that this will be done by June, 1963. The publication of these reports will close Mobil's developmental work in this field and thereafter education and commerce will have to take the initiative. Our findings in the adult world can be summarised as follows:

Reading ability at Executive levels

"The level of reading ability measured in terms of comprehension and the time taken to achieve comprehension show conclusively that READING ABILITY IS A MATTER OF TRAINING AND NOT OF INTELLIGENCE.

"The Nelson-Denny Test was used to measure the reading levels of 120 senior executives, executives and officials in the main centres of the Union. These results showed that reading ability ranged from the superb to the shocking and, furthermore, that invariably high comprehensions were related to high speeds and low comprehensions were associated with low speeds. It must be borne in mind that the persons tested were all persons of PROVED ABILITY. At the conclusion of 14 hours' training the average development showed gains in percentile rankings of 22 for speed with 11 for comprehension. These considerable gains are even more startling when it is considered that many of the executives, as they themselves stated, put in very little practice during the period of the course.

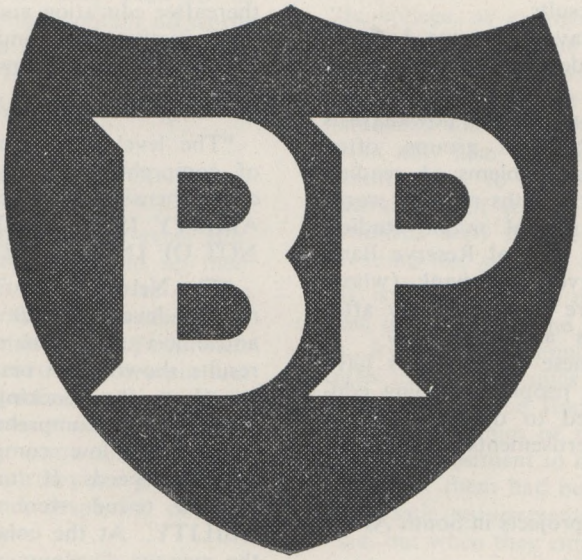
"I would like to quote the President of the C.S.I.R., who attended the Pretoria course:

" 'Attending the course has been a most stimulating experience and although I have not had enough time to do all the prescribed exercises regularly, I feel convinced that I have acquired greater speed in reading and comprehension.

" 'My only regret is that I did not attend such a course at school or university for I am sure that with such training I should have been able to attain much more than I have been able to do. I only hope that the educational authorities will take note thereof and introduce the course into our Schools and Technical Colleges.' "(7)

In Johannesburg other work of an exploratory nature has been carried out with a few groups of adults. This has been based on improved comprehension and the understanding of the principles of good reading.





RESEARCH

KEEPS BP AHEAD



Bearing in mind the exploratory nature of the courses the following comments may be of more than passing interest:

A course of four lectures devoted to discussion of good reading was, according to the participants, of great value. The ten selected first year University students found that they could immediately apply some of the principles discussed to their daily reading with beneficial results. These principles related to overall comprehension, need for selection, tensions and reading, and all adaptation of reading to purpose.

A survey of the reading abilities of 42 university and training college students, showed clearly the need for improvement in reading skills.

The average reading rate was just below 200 words per minute, rather slow for college requirements as shown in the well-organised study reading selection, and far too slow for the more informal style of the second selection.

The majority of these first-year students seemed to get only a vague general idea of what they had read, and were unable to distinguish the main ideas from the supporting points or the subsidiary background material.

Only five students gave fairly adequate summaries of the articles. Although most of the students could identify the main theme in a multiple-choice question, it was quite clearly shown that they were unable, without aid, to recognise the central thought and main ideas and the significant detail supporting them. In many instances the insignificant background detail was recalled, and the most important factors were omitted. There was obviously a lack of organised thought while reading, and, except in a few instances, no relationship between ideas could be seen. The summaries were written in a rambling style, and were often quite inaccurate.

Introductory Efficient Reading Courses of ten to twelve sessions, consisting of discussion of principles and practical exercises, showed practical results.

Professional people reported much greater efficiency in dealing with "business" reading matter —correspondence and trade journals; housewives on the greater enjoyment of their leisure reading; post graduate students, especially in more technical fields, on better study habits. These may sound like advertising blurbs but are easily accounted for. Very little direction is given to reading after the first preliminary mechanics of reading in the lower primary school. It is not capability that is lacking but "Know-how".

The results obtained with one group are shown hereunder.

The pre- and post-tests on which the figures are based were of equivalent semi-serious matter. Comprehension questions related to understanding of main ideas, relationship to detail, and recall of facts.

	Pre-Test		Post-Test		Attendance
	Rate	Comprehension	Rate	Comprehension	
A.	300 w.p.m.	60%	552	50%	11 out of 12
B.	314	60%	531	75%	10 „ „ „
C.	310	60%	500	75%	12 „ „ „
D.	346	80%	562	85%	10 „ „ „
E.	250	50%	562	70%	8 „ „ „
F.	450	65%	—	—	11 „ „ „

(F missed the post-test but his average scores over the last four sessions were 741—70%.)

Figures for two other members of the class were not available.

This was an introductory course only; greater gains may be expected when the course has been completed. More practice and guidance on specific personal problems, would help to consolidate the gains already made. Nevertheless, the comments offered by these readers are illuminating.

At the beginning of the course, aims were stated as:

To regain interest in my studies;
To be able to concentrate more;
To read faster;
Not to tire so easily;
To improve speed, comprehension and retention.

At the end of the preliminary courses remarks were:

A. "Improved speed and comprehension." Improved comprehension did not show up in the post-test but had fluctuated considerably during the course.

B. "Greater awareness of problems involved in more efficient reading." A slow, thorough reader finding difficulty in adjusting reading to purpose, this student made considerable gains towards the end of the course.

C. "Reading rate has improved. This has surprised me as at the beginning of the course I was quite certain that nothing could be done about my reading. Has given me much hope for the future." This student admitted a feeling of resistance to reading, especially of a technical type. He suffers from repressed double vision and nervousness, and a feeling of inadequacy hindered concentration and comprehension.

D. "Learned to consider the value of previewing material before reading thoroughly and to adjust pace to suit the material and purpose."

E. "Insight into problems of which I was not aware when I first came here."

The results with a group of women interested in voluntary social services is also of value. Here motivation from outside sources was not so strong, though the group was interested enough to continue for 18 sessions. Initial rates were low, under 200

w.p.m. average, but comprehension was fair, 70%. Gains of 50% to over 100% were made in rate while the average comprehension rose to 90%. Considering the attendance (no one attended more than 14 of the sessions), the average gain was worth while, and the application of the principles discussed to the reading of more serious novels showed even more considerable gains.

It is evident that this is a field of study that should be explored further. A need for re-orientation towards reading is indicated at all levels in the schools and community—the recognition of reading as a means of communication first and then the building up of literary appreciation, and the continuing practice of the various skills needed in reading.

The Efficient Reader:

Through these courses we hope to encourage a more active type of reader, a reader who should gain more than the mere gist of what he has read. He should be stimulated by his experience, the acting of a part, the challenge of solving a problem together with the author. He should be able to recognise the main ideas and the salient details; to see and appreciate *all* the parts in relation to each other and to the whole.

The efficient reader is no longer fooled by emotionally-toned words; he no longer falls for unsubstantial arguments; he fully appreciates the tone of the article or book. Aware of the intent, he accepts the challenge as he would in conversation, and evaluates the facts against his own experience. With his ability to follow the theme or plot easily, he has time to study the finer points of the play or story and can enjoy his reading to the full.

If there is a single factor which is more important or more basic than others in better reading it is *awareness*. Just as the good driver is fully aware of the total situation of his driving, including his purpose, so the efficient reader is fully aware of the total situation of his reading—the author's intent, his own purpose and, above all, his judgment and evaluation of what he is reading.

"Furthermore, the latent potential in many children regarded as average, is made latent by their lack of ability to read intelligently, and advanced reading training, I am sure, would do much towards turning latent potential into patent potential."([7])

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([6]) Dr. Nila Banton-Smith, as reported in "The Star", Johannesburg, September 9th, 1959.

([7]) As stated in a letter from R. H. Loxton to the writer.

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