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READING SKILLS AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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We live in a world where reading is a dying art. More time is devoted to the screen, either the TV or the ubiquitous smartphone. In such a scenario how is language acquisition possible, maybe we have to go back to square one, and reading is a precise process. It involves accurate, detailed, sequential perception and identification of letters, words, spelling patterns, and larger language units. Text is essentially an active process of reconstructing meaning from language represented by graphic symbols (letters) just as listening is the dynamic process of restoring sense from the sound symbols (phonemes).

Reading skills enable readers to turn writing into the meaning and achieve the goals of reading independence, comprehension, and fluency. The ability to learn rapidly and accurately is so fundamental to be labeled successful. The development of reading fluency is a malaise that afflicts even a postgraduate student of English literature. It has been a neglected art, despite many reading authorities insist on the importance of reading curriculum.

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An excellent public speaker would be outstanding in reading fluency. Fluent public speakers embed in their voice those same elements that are associated with reading fluency – accuracy in speech, appropriate speed, phrasing, expression and modulation. The speaker's use of these aspects of fluency facilitates the listener's comprehension. Speaking inappropriate phrases, emphasizing certain words, raising and lowering the volume, and varying intonation help the listener to understand what the speaker is trying to communicate.

If we contrast a less fluent speaker with one who is versatile with the language, we could quickly notice that the one who is anxious about speaking in public, renders his presentation in a slow, word-by-word monotone. This makes it considerably more difficult for listeners to comprehend the performance. There are very few verbal cues to follow and that will result in incomprehension. The listeners may find themselves physically present there but will be drifting away from the presentation altogether. Using this analogy to reading, one could very well say that reading fluency positively affects reading comprehension.

Specific intervention exercises can be used to build reading skills. One has to look for whatever one is interested in. The philosophy is to provide them with whatever they are interested in and let them hone their reading skills on that content. Scientifically-based research reviews have established that reading fluency is a critical component of learning to read and that an effective reading program needs to include instruction in fluency.

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Reading fluency acts as a bridge between the two primary components of reading – word decoding and comprehension. On one end of the bridge, fluency connects to accuracy and automaticity in decoding. At the other end, fluency relates to perception through prosody or expressive interpretation.

WHAT DO WE READ?

Here are the main text-types one usually comes across:

- Novels, short stories; other literary texts and passages
- Plays
- Poems, nursery rhymes
- Newspapers, magazines
- Specialized articles, reviews, essays
- Recipes
- Advertisements travel brochures
- Comic strips, caricatures

WHY DO WE READ?

There are two main reasons for reading:

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- Reading for pleasure
- Reading to find out something – to get information.

HOW DO WE READ?

The main ways of reading are as follows:

- Skimming: quickly running one's eyes over a text to get the gist of it.
- Scanning: Quickly going through a text to find a particular piece of information.
- Extensive reading: Reading longer texts, usually for one's pleasure.
- Intensive reading: Reading shorter texts to extract specific information. This is more an accuracy activity involving reading for detail.

PERCEPTUAL ACCURACY AND WORD RECOGNITION AUTOMATICITY

The ability to accurately discriminate letters, realize letter order, and recognize words instantly is an essential requirement for fluency in reading to emergy. In reading, the reader's eyes will typically move three to five times per second. The multiple fixations, and regressions, and the wandering visual approach to reading, will ultimately inhibit a reader's ease and comfort in text, limit reading rate, as well as reduce comprehension. It is acknowledged that extensive reading, and encouraging students to read more, is one approach to improving word recognition. But most poor readers will not typically read extensively, for they are not efficient and they do not enjoy reading. As a reader develops the capacity to recognize words more rapidly and develops a strong visual memory, fewer fixations and regressions in reading will be required. Excess

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fixations and regressions (reverse fixations) to recognize words result in the expenditure of more time and energy which in turn will reduce the reading rate and inhibit ease and comfort in reading.

PHONICS APPROACH TO READ

Advocates of the phonics approach are concerned about helping beginners become independent readers as soon as possible. They feel the best way to do this is to help learners learn letter/sound correspondences so that they can sound out, or "decode," words. Frequently, students in their formative stage are taught not only elemental letter/sound correspondences but rules for pronouncing letters and combinations of letters and for articulating out words. Now, this has been superseded by a sight-word approach. Reading means getting meaning from certain combinations of letters. Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read, as the twig is bent so grows the tree.

Finally, reading comprehension should not be spared from other skills. There are a few cases in real life when we do not talk or write about what we have read or when we do not relate what we have learned to something we might have heard. It is therefore vital, to link the different skills through the reading activities are chosen:

- reading and writing, e.g., summarizing, mentioning what one has read in a letter, note-making, etc.

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- Reading and listening, e.g., comparing an article and a news-bulletin, using recorded information to solve a written problem, matching opinions and texts, etc.
- Reading and speaking, e.g., discussions, debates, appreciation, etc.

Therefore, reading is an active skill in achieving language acquisition. As mentioned earlier, it involves guessing, predicting, checking and asking questions. This should be taken into consideration when devising reading comprehension exercises. It is possible, for instance, to develop the students' powers of inference through systematic practice or introduce questions that encourage students to anticipate the content of a text from its title and illustrations or the end of a story from the preceding paragraphs. These steps would undoubtedly go a long way in motivating an individual who is struggling to acquire fluency, for gaining language acquisition, fluent reading is of paramount importance.

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