

Teacher Education Institute (TEI)

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English Literature

In a wider perspective the study of English, or any other mother tongue, is part of the area of speech. The two direct manifestations of speech are the spoken and written word. These are covered in “English: Mother Tongue” and “English Literature”. Please note that the introduction and development of Writing and Reading is dealt with in the presentation “Learning to Write and Read” although there is a brief overview regarding the development of individualized reading skills below.

Prediction and Repetition

One aid that is often overlooked is that young children will welcome material where the story content is already familiar to them. When the text is predictable there is a built-in element of success. Obvious examples are texts or stories which are known orally or that can be easily identified or remembered, for example, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, riddles, poems and so on.

This aspect of predictability also arises out of the repetition that occurs within many traditional tales. The kinds of repetition we find in the “Three Billy Goats Gruff” or “The Enormous Turnip” are not only examples that delight children but also help develop their reading skills.

It is now assumed that where teachers have used our approach. their children have reached the stage where they are capable of reading the sentences they have written down in their own first readers. In addition, that they have been introduced to books that contain simple printed sentences.

Such teachers also remember that the transition from the language experience approach of the early stage of reading to a set text can be critical and that they, the teachers, should be sensitive to the adjustments children are making.

At this stage students have begun to develop and use the various skills needed for the task, namely, simple phonic analysis, recall of words memorized from sight, and cueing from semantics, syntax and illustration.

Reading for Meaning

Some teachers believe that the mastery of single words is the key to becoming a competent reader. Word attack skills and phonic skills are still regarded as of paramount importance in learning to read.

This belief however is mistaken, for although these skills may be essential to fluent reading, insufficient recognition is given to the fact that words, for the most part, only have meaning within the context in which they are found, read or used. Such emphasis also ignores that the extraction of meaning from a text is more than taking the sum of the meaning of individual words.

Some teachers also regard reading aloud as the principal and in many cases the exclusive activity in the interpretive process. This is also a mistaken belief for this activity tends to emphasize one particular strategy at the expense of others. It encourages “word by word reading” and is of little help in the interpretation of the text.

Reading aloud to the teacher is therefore of limited value in the development of reading for meaning (although, for other reasons, it obviously has value, for example, for the teacher to check on the child’s progress or for a child needing attention or support).

From our viewpoint we consider the learning to read process as occurring within the wider perspective of the child’s development and, in particular, the child’s desire for meaning. We should be clear also about the type of faculty that we hope to develop.

Children will create and develop their own meaning from what they have read. In other words they are doing a great deal more than repeating, however accurately, what has been written.

Children begin to develop a clearer understanding of the composition of written language. As their imagination is stimulated they will broaden their predominantly intuitive form of thinking. Their understanding of the world, which is ever increasing in depth and breadth, will be experienced through the affective as well as the cognitive.

This is a critical period in children's development. It is a period that should not be rushed by the teacher, for there is the danger of making premature demands on the intellect by moving along too quickly.

Children will have now completed the first stage of instruction and are ready to move beyond the preparatory language-experience approach. Unfortunately, it often happens that a child's first encounter with a "real" book, to be read by him, turns out to have little meaning.

For example, the intrinsic worth for the child and the pleasure he experiences may derive simply from the mechanical activity of word calling. This will certainly be the case if children have been taught by methods that over-emphasize the use of phonological cues.

It follows that the context within which children are learning to read should avoid the need for detailed phonic analysis. It is recommended, therefore, that children have ample opportunity, within the text, to experience all the other cueing techniques.

Individualized Reading

Up to this point the teaching of reading will have occurred, for the most part, within a group or class. The eventual objective, however, must be to lead children towards the ability to carry out the task by themselves.

Indeed, because so many factors are involved and the rate of progress so diverse in different children, the teacher should attempt, as far as possible, to guide each child on to an individual plan or programme so that he can develop his skills in his own way and at his own pace.

The teacher will need sound powers of judgment to see that the child is guided through the stages of reading development at an acceptable rate, while at the same time making sure that no excessive and premature demands are made. In addition, the task involves a learning process that needs to be slowly absorbed by the child in a structured framework and it would be naive to think that this process will happen spontaneously and naturally.

We can see from the following example what could easily happen if four children are given the same class reader to read. The example may be extreme; at the same time the underlying principle, namely, children obtaining books that do not match their reading age, unfortunately, occurs quite often.

The first child reads fluently, is able to comprehend what has been written, and can work independently without the teacher's help.

The second child is able to read most of the text but has occasional difficulty although the level of challenge does not affect his confidence.

The third child is able to read some of the text but is in continual difficulty; the level of challenge would affect the child's confidence if the teacher did not continually offer practical support and encouragement.

The fourth child is able to read very little of the text and needs constant supervision and support. Without this help the child quickly reaches a level of frustration where he gives up, thereby producing a negative attitude towards reading.

It is obvious from the above that the main reason for failure in the fourth child is that the reading material he was given was quite unsuitable. There will be some cases, particularly amongst academically challenged children, where the level of frustration is never far away and these children require specialist remedial help. However, there will be many more children who would not reach this level of frustration if they were given the right material at the right time.

How then is the teacher to decide whether the child should be encouraged to read this reader or that reader or some other reader? Probably the most usual way is for the teacher to rely on his/her own judgment based on his/her experience and knowledge together with other factors, some of which are described below.

Attention would obviously have to be given to the interest and motivation of the child and the child's temperament would also be a major factor.

The main objective of an individualized reading program is to guide a child through carefully chosen books so that he experiences a wide variety of reading material, and also that gradually and efficiently, he is able to develop a whole range of reading skills that will help him to enjoy reading.

Types of Books and Stages of Development

An important aspect of the development of reading skills is to see that the right kind of material is made available according to each child's reading competence. It is, therefore, worth describing the reading material that is needed if they are to pass through the stages of becoming competent readers.

The first reading books are, of course, the child's own books. Written and illustrated by each child, and containing a brief record of stories told in class, topics arising out of other lessons, and personal experiences.

The early ones will be quite simple, with controlled vocabulary and sentence constructions; slowly they will become more sophisticated; each time making greater demands upon the child's reading ability.

Each child will create a number of these books and, where the content differs from child to child, they can be "borrowed" to be read by other children. Some of these can be displayed in the class.

The next stage is to see that the children are given reading material that will bridge the gap between their own readers and commercially produced texts.

One means of filling this gap is for the teacher to produce texts, based upon familiar vocabulary, sentence construction and content. These could be illustrated by child and/or teacher.

The final stage is the introduction of the printed texts.

These will be carefully selected, and would be best introduced on an individual basis, taking into account the child's reading competence, temperament, particular interests, and the subject matter the teacher feels would be appropriate for each child, at that particular time.

Different Stages The following is an example of different stages. They are offered as a guideline and should be accepted as such; other categorizations will be just as relevant and accurate.

Stage 0 - Picture Books and First Readers.

Designed to increase the child's oral language. These will have rich story content in the illustrations but the majority will have no text. They can also be used by children to create their own text.

Stage 1 - Introductory Readers.

Books with controlled vocabulary and sentence constructions leading children very gradually through the early stages of reading development. Stage 1 also includes a sample of books for children who find the transition to the commercially produced books a difficult step, and need a number of readers that resemble the books they have themselves produced.

Stage 2 - Developmental Readers.

Books that increase gradually in their demands upon the developing reader. There may be a need to have a few steps of increasing difficulty within this stage.

Stage 3 - Bridging Readers.

Books that provide children with the experience of longer books and lead the way to general fiction and so on.

Suggested Story Material/Literature

Some suggestions of literature that the students can read are now described. However, the following are but suggestions and we fully appreciate that each teacher will have their own list of literature of required reading.

Grade 1

Fairy Tales - Grimms, Russian, Celtic or other tales from appropriate "older" cultures.

Grade 2

Fables and Legends: these two story forms provide a bridge to carry the children from the archetypal world which they found in the fairy and folk tales, to an awareness of man's nature and his relationship to the world around him. The fables present human strengths and weaknesses in the form of birds and animals; in contrast the legends (which again are cross cultural) describe in story form the special qualities found in human nature, for example, telling of the highest achievements of human endeavour.

Grade 3

Stories from Ancient History. Circumstances will influence the appropriate cultural source.

Grade 4

This is the time of hero-worship; 9 year olds are seeking models of behaviour and heroes that can inspire. The Norse Myths, the Sagas of Iceland and Scandinavia are especially chosen for their strong and bold characters; children easily relate and identify with the deeds of daring found in such literature.

Grade 5/6

Indian, Persian and Egyptian Legends, The value of stories in verse; for example, Longfellow's "Hiawatha", Tales of Chivalry, Greek Myths and Legends. The last subject area, Greek Myths and Legends, are particularly important as 10/11 year olds are now ready for great epics and legends. Whereas, for example, the Norse Sagas were appropriate for the 9 year old, the Greek heroes lead the 10/11 year olds into a much wider perspective involving insight, vision and sensitivity.

Grades 7/8

Historical Novels give depth, insight and perceptions. For example, Arthurian Legends as well as stories supporting geography and history, tales from Shakespeare and epic and dramatic poetry.