

## The Meaning of Reading as a Social Skill

J. Harlan Shores

TO POINT to the importance of reading in a highly developed technological society, and especially in a democracy, is to belabor the obvious. Even those who are to carry out directives must read, and those involved in decision making, as all of us are in this twentieth-century democracy, even more obviously must know how to read.

More important perhaps is what reading means as a social skill. Critics to the contrary, most children learn to read and understand simple materials in the primary grades, and there are many studies to indicate that they do this at least as well now as they did in previous generations. Why then is there such evident dissatisfaction by both educators and laymen with the ability of students to read at every level of education from grade one through the graduate college?

Some point with horror to the fact that a significant proportion of students read a year or more below grade level and that this situation seems to get worse in the junior and senior high school. Surely these people have not forgotten that reading abilities are normally distributed and that, by definition of "norm," half of the students at any level must read below the norm. Surely they must also realize that the opportunity for spread in reading abilities is much larger in the junior and senior high school than it is in the primary grades.

Teachers must not torment themselves nor permit themselves to be tormented

by these self-evident facts. The only conclusion to be drawn from these is that children differ widely in reading abilities, that these differences are even more apparent in the higher grades, and that we should keep striving, as we always have, to help each child to the limits of our ability and his, thus raising the norm.

However, pointing to the inevitability of a normal distribution of reading abilities, and even to the likelihood that normal abilities are better than they were, does not lessen our concern that students at each level do not read well enough. The real reason for this concern is that the curriculum at all levels and the social circumstances beyond schooling are placing greater and greater demands upon reading skills.

The first grade child cannot read well enough to do the kinds of things with reading that his teacher and his parents would like for him to be able to do. Nor does the graduate student satisfy his instructor in this regard, and the same is true at every level between these extremes. Beyond the school, the employee does not read well enough to meet the demands of his job or of his employer. The citizen cannot exercise his choices adequately, because he cannot read well enough to be a good citizen.

The trouble then is not that people cannot read. The percentage of illiteracy in this country is steadily decreasing. The trouble instead is with a naive definition of reading which implies an

equally naive understanding of the reading process. When we say that most children in the kindergarten cannot read, but that most children can read at the end of grade one, we have defined reading in a manner that is unacceptable to reading specialists and misleading to any understanding of the social demands placed upon reading.

Shortly before his death, W. S. Gray wrote, "Basic research in reading seeks to secure a clearer understanding . . . of the nature of the reading act."<sup>1</sup> When reading is defined as a process that goes beyond understanding to critical evaluation and interpretation, one begins to see how extremely complicated this process really is. While one can think without reading, one cannot read without thinking. Reading and thinking are inseparable when printed materials provide the stimulus for thought. Thus what is needed to probe the perimeters of whatever dimensions are set for reading comprehension is a better understanding of how children and adults think. With these understandings really important breakthroughs become possible in both theory and research concerned with reading comprehension.

### Relational Factors

Of the thousands of researches concerned with reading and the reading process, a large proportion deal with what might be called *relational* factors. The relational factors are those conditions or abilities that are related to the process of reading, but are not reading itself. Some of these relate to the physical characteristics of the material—size and style of type, blackness and sharpness of print, quality and tone of paper,

kind and placement of illustrations, and the like. Others relate to less tangible aspects of the material—clarity of writing, complexity of ideas, sentence length and structure, kind of writing (poetry, narrative, descriptive, etc.) and to the field of knowledge from which the writing was drawn.

Other factors relate to the reader, his personality and his environment while reading—general health, emotional stability, skill with word recognition techniques, vocabulary knowledge, vision, hearing, attitudes toward reading, mental abilities, biases, ideals, prejudices, freedom from distraction, and the like. Still other relational factors<sup>2</sup> affect reading speed and comprehension by relating the reader to the material he is reading—the background of experience he has for this material, his interest in this field and especially in the part of it about which he is reading, his familiarity with the peculiarities of style and phraseology of an author and a field, and whether the concepts about which he reads are compatible with or contrary to those he already holds in this field.

It would be foolhardy to deny that any one of these factors could be a crucial determinant of reading speed and comprehension for any one person. Thus each may be a referent for diagnosis and subsequent instruction. Each of these conditions, skills, abilities is related to the reading process in much the same way that each aspect of one's personality structure is related to one's behavior. However, it is important to note that none of these factors is reading itself and that a composite of all of them is not reading. They may be the conditions and abilities from which readers are made, but they are not reading. To know words is not to read. To have interests is not to

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<sup>1</sup>"Research in Reading Marches On." *The Reading Teacher* 12(2):74; December 1958.

third grade; its purpose is not to suggest that all learning problems may now be eliminated and that no attention to individual rates and ways of learning need be emphasized. Its purpose, as a simple alphabetic medium approximating the traditional, is to insure that the beginning stages of reading are as natural as possible, that reading can begin without frustration, that the child will learn readily, learn reading and writing easily, and that, after he has developed his decoding skills to an efficient level, his transfer to traditional print will be as simple and effective as possible. These purposes are met. As suggested by various observations on concomitant effects, these purposes are exceeded.

Shall we encourage wide use of i/t/a for beginning reading instruction? The research evidence, the observations of teachers, supervisors, and specialists and I say, "Yes!"

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#### Editorial—Shores

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read. To have experience prerequisite to understanding is not reading. There is a real fallacy in confusing these relational factors with the reading process.

#### Functional Elements

The actual process of reading is concerned not with *relational* factors but with *functional* elements. Instead of asking what factors are related to reading ability or inability, the answer to which provides the relational factors, we now ask, "What does a reader do when he reads?" He locates information. He surveys material to see what is there. He gets main ideas. He memorizes facts. He follows directions. He skims for general impressions or for one fact. He appreciates. He criticizes. He evaluates.

This list of functional tasks, like that of relational factors, could go on and on.

The point here is not that reading theorists and researchers should abandon study of relational factors. These are extremely important in development, diagnosis and remediation. It is instead that increased attention must be given to the actual process of reading, the functional tasks, and especially that these be understood and developed beyond the primary grades when the need for them expresses the limits of reading as a social skill.

As the impact of science and technology places greater and greater demands upon our reading and thinking abilities, the need for understanding the functional reading processes increases proportionately. For what purposes must we read in mathematics, science, the social sciences? What are the basic research-study skills? Locating them is a first step toward theory and research in their development, and to understand these is to understand reading as a social skill.

—J. HARLAN SHORES, *Professor of Elementary Education, University of Illinois, Urbana.*

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#### Values—Lieberman and Simon

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teaching. It has made teaching for us an ever more humane act. Perhaps the reader will understand this better by reading one last values card.

I keep thinking that someday I will no longer be on this earth.

I will not be alive.

I will not exist.

My eyes and my soul will be closed forever. Forever is a frightening word.

I don't want to live the unlive life.

I want to fly *now* while I still have the wings of life.

Only I don't know where to go.

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