

Speed Reading in the Seventies

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IN A recent critical article, Ronald P. Carver (4) reported that he has reached the conclusion that speed reading is about five percent sense and 95 percent nonsense, and that speed reading courses simply cannot do what they claim to do. On the other hand, James I. Brown (3) maintains that *all* readers are capable of improving reading rate and comprehension and that this is especially true for average and above average readers. Between these two extremes lie many confusing and conflicting reports and claims by other writers.

For several years readers have been subjected to a running argument between Evelyn Woods with her well known advertising program for her "Reading Dynamics" classes on the one hand, and her bitter critics, George Spache (16) and Sanford Taylor (21), who vigorously maintain that any person who reads over 900 words per minute is not really reading.

The reading public has a different concern, however. For many of them some change in reading habits is essential for survival. Many individuals feel that the public school reading programs have not prepared them to meet their current needs. With an ever-increasing volume of knowledge and constant acceleration of publication of information in all fields, reading has become increasingly more important, not only as a

study skill, but as a means of keeping up-to-date in one's business or profession.

Concern for inadequate reading performance has led to a rapid growth of a wide variety of commercial reading programs and "do it yourself" mail-order reading improvement programs. Reading has become "big business" to some pioneers in these areas. Are such programs really meeting a need in modern society which could have been met just as well by our public schools? Several writers (1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 20) seem to feel that such needs could be met as effectively within the school curriculum.

The average teacher tends to be conservative about undertaking innovative reading programs which have not yet been firmly established. Reading comments of some critics like Carver (4), Rauch (14), and Taylor (21) may make them even more cautious. The inconsistency of research results and the variety of basic research approaches in the past two decades are adequate causes for confusion and caution. These characteristics have been revealed in various attempts to analyze and summarize research relating to speed reading such as the reports by Berger (2), Miller (11: 9-12), and the *Journal of Educational Research*

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(12). Although many of these studies (1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 15, 17, 20) have reported significant and continuing improvement in reading skills, the reader encounters considerable difficulty in many cases (4, 9, 14, 16) in trying to get a clear explanation of objectives, procedures, and evaluative process. Rankin (13) summarizes much of this concern in his comments on confusion in objectives and terminology and in the apparent use of inadequate or inappropriate measurement devices.

Definition

Perhaps the most basic aspect of this confusion is the wide range of meaning assigned to the word "reading." Although reading has been regarded as the first of the basic "3 R's," the term requires more than ten lines of explanation in a modern college dictionary. Definitions range all the way from "to utter aloud" to "to become informed." While many authors try to restrict the definition to a limited basic process, others regard skimming and scanning as specific parts of the total range of reading variations. Many definitions stress understanding, interpretation, and translation of symbols. As one analyzes current publications relating to the teaching of reading, several variations in function or purpose stand out.

One fundamental objective encompasses a basic understanding of language symbols, sentence structure, phonetic concepts, and other theoretical concepts. All of these involve emphasis on the reading process including visual contact with every word, with subsequent summation, integration, interpretation, and assimilation of meaning.

Although few would question the need for this approach in basic language development, many students seem to feel that application and practice in such procedures are sometimes extended too far into the curriculum, and that, in many cases, it reaches a point of diminishing returns. Those who see this objective as the primary function in reading support the concept of the "800-900 word-per-minute limit" in reading rate (16, 21) and usually argue that comprehension and interpretation skills are far more impor-

tant than rate. Often they are extreme critics of innovative programs in "speed reading."

Another school of thought is represented by Brown (3), who sees one of the primary objectives in reading as the communication of ideas between people. He tends to present reading as one of the basic communication skills, and to assume that good reading is based on a solid foundation of language arts. Based on relative degrees of basic development, he believes that everyone, regardless of background, is capable of developing more efficient reading habits and can unlock the doors to much wider and deeper communication through the reading process. Thus he sees reading as a basic communication tool in developing self-concepts and understanding of the social and psychological environment in which one lives. This process stresses transfer of units of thought through the use of written words, but not necessarily with the concept of visual contact with each word, and thus the process does not support the "800-900 word limit per minute."

A third school of thought has developed among those who are concerned with reading as a basic study skill (10, 11, 20) and who see reading as one of several processes related to learning and retaining new material. Recognizing basic communication concepts, the focus is on the perception of ideas and the mental processes of retention and integration of significant material. Reading is a process in which the eyes are used in an aggressive and controlled fashion by the brain in the search, discovery, and transmission of concepts and ideas. Transmission of collections of verbal symbols from printed pages is viewed as a process comparable to transmission of symbols of size, shape, color, and movement in the physical environment. Speed of reading is viewed as flexible, and as a function directly related to the perceived purpose of the specific reading activity. Emphasis is on *transmission of ideas* rather than words, and adjustments are made in terms of previous exposure, attitudes, and motiva-

tion rather than on details of language structure.

Again, this approach assumes a basic foundation in language arts which has been developed in relative degrees among all individuals. It usually involves the acceptance of each person as he is, with the emphasis on helping him develop the most efficient use of his skills in the attainment of his goals. In this approach, reading is viewed as a search *for the ideas behind the words*.

Comprehension vs. Rate?

Perhaps some of our problems in research and implementation of new ideas stem from needs to find security in established positions. On the one hand, some have seemed to insist on content and *comprehension without recognition of rate*. In their concern over possible loss of comprehension, they have refused to accept *any* value in the innovative speed reading programs and have marshaled their forces to discredit such new programs. They may insist on too rigid a definition of reading and in the process may become insensitive to the increasing reading demands of a rapidly changing society.

The advocates of change may have created as many problems, however, in their seeming emphasis on *rate without concern for comprehension*. Some programs seem to have developed with limited research orientation and often with maximum emphasis on sales promotion and market exploitation. Even among the more sophisticated advocates of speed reading, they often observed that extreme improvement in speed could be accomplished without apparent changes in comprehension skill, and this led them to an obvious de-emphasis on comprehension in some parts of their program. Thus they frequently deserved the criticism of not seeming to care about content, even though their materials reflected a concern for comprehension as well as rate.

Many of those concerned about the read-

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ing process realized long ago that "speed reading" as such was not the answer to learning problems. They advocated that good reading programs should emphasize *rate with comprehension*. They recognized the inadequacy of some measurement concepts and began to stress procedures appropriate to the goals of the program.

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Concerned with the problem of emphasis on either *rate* or *comprehension* alone, authorities in several programs developed the concept of a combined term which represented the product of the rate and the comprehension score. Emerging originally with a variety of labels, this concept is now referred to by many authorities (3, 11) as *reading efficiency*. Although such a concept is justifiably criticized as being an artifact rather than an actual reading skill, its use seems to have been of definite motivational and evaluational value. This dual emphasis involves recognition of basic needs in vocabulary development and in basic language skills and stresses development in these areas *simultaneously* with the development of rapid reading skills. Advocates of this approach tend to reject the term "speed reading" and to prefer terms such as "effective reading" or "efficient reading."

Perhaps this increasing emphasis on *rate with comprehension* may lead to a greater freedom to develop curricular environments in which teachers can experiment with a variety of innovative materials and approaches in an attempt to change student attitudes toward reading and to develop to an optimum their individual potential in reading and thinking skills.

Thus far the impact of the "speed reading" concept is much more apparent in universities, colleges, and community colleges than it is in secondary schools. Apparently secondary teachers have been somewhat

more resistant to new concepts in teaching reading than they have been in the fields of math and science. Perhaps this is based in part on the common assumption that in secondary school, reading is the responsibility of every teacher, and consequently it often gets crowded out by content and becomes the responsibility of no one. In other cases, a secondary reading teacher has been identified, but has been stereotyped as a "remedial" teacher, and has failed to accomplish general developmental reading goals.

In a comprehensive overview of curriculum, each school may need to identify areas of responsibility for some instruction in developmental reading skills for *all* students. In doing so, consideration might be given to the following points which have emerged in some of the research on the topic.

1. All students have the potential for substantial improvement in reading efficiency (3, 11), and studies have revealed significant improvement in students with a wide variety of backgrounds (8, 10, 17, 18, 20).

2. Improvements in reading skills can be retained for substantial periods of time (5, 7, 10, 15, 18, 20).

3. Correlations between rate and comprehension tend to be low (6), and large increases in rate can be attained without significant loss in comprehension (1, 18).

4. Good reading programs stress a variety of speeds, based on individual background and purpose for reading (9). Flexibility in the use of reading skills appropriate to the objectives is one of the important goals in a developmental reading program (13).

5. Attitude change is an important aspect of most reading efficiency classes. Gormly and Nittoli (8) stressed the significance of attitudinal change in their reading work with institutionalized boys, and Sykes (20) reported changes in attitude toward recreational reading and toward reading as a tool to free time for more participation in school activities.

6. Perception and reading rate seem to be closely related (19), and Stauffer (18) reports that some more able students seem to have the potential to read almost as fast as they think.

7. Success of reading efficiency classes

seems highly dependent upon the attitude and enthusiasm of the instructor (3, 11). Perhaps instructors who are to be involved in developmental reading programs should first participate in a reading efficiency class to explore at first-hand their own concerns and their own reading potential.

Speed reading and reading efficiency programs introduced in colleges and secondary schools in the past two decades have exposed many students to skimming, scanning, and selective reading skills. Most individuals associated with such programs have

come to realize that no one really knows or understands his maximum reading potential or flexibility. Reading efficiency courses seem to offer a great potential to free students from many doubts, fears, and negative attitudes they may have developed about their reading.

Research results seem to be sufficiently encouraging to justify continued experimentation and evaluation. Further research will determine the ultimate place of reading efficiency units in the secondary school curriculum of the modern school.

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