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THE SELECTION OF SILENT READING TEXTBOOKS

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In the discussions of elementary-school teachers and supervisors, no problem is more prominent than that of the improvement of the various abilities in silent reading. There are many reasons why this should be so. In the first place, the recent development of reading tests has given the problem a precision which it formerly lacked. Grade standards are gradually being worked out so that teachers now have a definite basis upon which their results may be compared with those obtained in other schools. In the second place, the recent experiments in the field of reading seem to show clearly that ability in silent reading can be surely and markedly improved. The third, and in some ways the most significant reason for the present interest in the problem, is to be found in the growing recognition that success in directing and improving the study habits of grade and high-school students depends, to a very large degree, upon the improvement of abilities in silent reading. The recognition of the intimate relation between reading and study is very important. On the one hand it helps to offset the over-emphasis upon the mere administrative factors in directed study. On the other hand it emphasizes use of reading as the means of efficient work with books.

The discussions of silent reading have commonly emphasized but two qualities, viz., speed and comprehension. But when the problem of improving ability in silent reading is viewed in its relation to the problem of improving study habits, it becomes clear that two additional qualities must be considered. One cannot leave out of account the ability to organize what is read in terms of the reader's purposes. Neither can one neglect those technics which will help to insure that what is read will be remembered.

On inquiring into the ability of a pupil to work with books we may accordingly ask four groups of questions:

1. Can he quickly locate data which he needs and read them

rapidly? This involves skill in the use of the index and the table of contents as well as ability to skim or to read rapidly.

2. Can he comprehend clearly what he has read? Has he a well-developed accuracy conscience which forbids guessing or the acceptance of hazy notions?

3. Has he the ability to find, select, and organize data so as to answer most effectively the purpose at hand? Does he recognize irrelevant data?

4. Does he understand the technics by which one can increase the amount remembered and provide for future use of the information gained?

If these four groups of abilities are accepted as representing the most important phases of silent reading, it would follow that any book which is to be used to train pupils in silent reading should either be specifically arranged to afford proper practice in exercises which have been found valuable for developing each of these abilities, or it should be easily adapted to such exercises. What should be some of the outstanding characteristics of such a book? A brief and partial list of the requirements follows:

1. It must be rich in factual and informational data. This means that the materials should be of the sort with which people *work*. Exposition, technical description, and argumentation based on concrete data—all of these are suited for exercises in silent reading. Such selections may be tested rigorously, so that any tendency to do hurried or half-baked work can be detected at once and counteracted. This is particularly important where the selection is to be used for speed exercises.

2. The content of the selections should be worth while for its own sake, well written, and scrupulously accurate. The exercises, if properly planned, should fix this valuable information in the minds of the students. Moreover, selections which are rich in content value tend to insure interest in the exercise and to guarantee practice with the kind of material which will be read in later life, while exercises containing data of no intrinsic worth produce an artificial situation and are inferior from every point of view.

3. Most of the selections should be of sufficient length to occupy the most rapid readers for several minutes. If occasional intensive paragraph study is desired, paragraphs from these

longer selections are quite as valuable, and in many ways more valuable than the isolated paragraphs. Long selections are particularly essential for exercises to develop the ability to organize. As a matter of fact, long exercises are essential to the development of any of the four abilities in silent reading which were enumerated above.

4. The silent reading text should contain some selections which are not in themselves a summary, that is, where data are given in great detail. It is not essential that this material be unorganized. Rather it should be rich in concrete material and organized on a basis different from that required in the exercise.

5. Some if not all of the selections should be preceded by a problem or problems which guide the pupil in his reading. This is especially necessary in exercises for speed and in exercises for organization. To ask a pupil merely to read rapidly, without giving him something definite to find through his rapid reading, is somewhat analogous to looking at one's feet while dancing. The actual process of reading should be in the background, the attention being centered in the problem and in the data which constitute the answer to it. Therefore, a pupil must have a purpose which will afford a criterion for the selection and organization of relevant data, and for the rejection of that which is irrelevant.

The exception to this principle is the exercise in making a digest, or the determination of the general characteristics of a selection. For such an exercise, however, the problems which introduce the selection may be ignored.

6. Each selection should be followed by appropriate tests of comprehension of the detail given in it and by tests of the ability to organize this detail. These tests must be formulated so as to test rigorously and should require no data not explicit or implied in the article. Such questions as, "What do you know about the author of this selection?" are worthless for the purposes of silent reading, and may indeed prove to be positively harmful. If they are to be included at all, it should be made clear to both teacher and pupil that the questions constitute no part of the silent reading drill. It seems much better to omit all questions which do not test the pupil's ability to comprehend, organize, or remember what he read in the selection. Occasional questions may be

asked for which the answer is: "The selection does not give data by which this question can be answered." In other words, the ability to know when a selection does not furnish relevant data is an important one.

7. The book should contain a first-class index and table of contents. Some of the selections should have paragraph and marginal headings, and some should not. These requirements, if satisfactorily met, will insure proper material for exercises in finding material rapidly through using the index, through using the table of contents, and by skimming.

8. Of course, the mechanical makeup of the book should be good. In fact, first-class printing is particularly necessary in this type of book.

One requirement not ordinarily met by texts in other subjects is desirable, i.e., the length of the selection as measured by the number of words should be indicated not only for the selection as a whole, but by paragraphs. It is possible that this information should be given at the end of the selection rather than in the margin, since in a speed exercise the appearance of numbers in the margin might prove a distraction and influence the reader to speed up his reading in a more mechanical fashion.

It is essential that there should be a good manual to accompany the exercise books. This manual should contain a pointed discussion of the problems involved in developing silent reading, and should give specific directions for teaching and testing each lesson.

What has been said implies, of course, that most literary selections are inferior for silent reading exercises of the type which characterize *work* with books. In general, the measure of good reading in literature is not so much efficiency as appreciation. The rigorous testing which is essential for the development of silent reading is impossible with most literary selections and when attempted will react unfavorably upon the appreciation of literature. In other words, both silent reading ability and literary appreciation suffer from such a practice. The literary reader will still have its place in connection with the development of literary appreciation. Literary appreciation should, however, be sharply distinguished from silent reading ability. If literary readers were to be used for the development of silent reading ability, it would

probably be better to read extensively than to subject a small number of selections to the dissecting exercises so often found in connection with the teaching of literature, or to the severe drill and rigorous testing usually found in silent reading lessons.

Until texts are prepared which satisfy the requirements laid down above, it will probably be better to depend upon textbooks and supplementary readers of the content sort, such as Keller and Bishop's *Industrial and Commercial Geography* and Chamberlain's *How We Are Fed*. These books do not, of course, contain directions for silent reading exercises, but the material in them is adapted to such exercises. Book companies might do well at this time to develop manuals of silent reading exercises to accompany the most widely used supplementary books in geography and history.