

Teaching Teenagers

Rehearsal: A Technique for Improving Reading Comprehension

Raymond E. Laurita

THE TERM "reading comprehension" is, like so many others currently in broad use in education, one which flows off the tongue almost as easily as "banana split." And yet, unlike "banana split," it isn't so easily defined when the effort is made to discover its precise meaning. In fact, this term has been so overused and misunderstood that it has lost its precision and now resides in a nebulous state of unspecificity along with a whole host of others, including *dyslexia*, *maturational lag*, *perceptual deficit*, *phonics instruction*, and *word-attack skills*, and soon to be joined by *linguistic reading approach*.

An accurate definition of "reading comprehension" would have to include a definition of *both* elements—"reading" and "comprehension." Unfortunately, neither element lends itself to the kind of easy definition or understanding implied by its wide usage. What does the average teacher mean when he refers to a child's ability to demonstrate reading comprehension? Usually, he means the child's adeptness at answering questions concerning a passage he has read either orally or silently. For too many children and adults, the assumption is that such adeptness accurately represents the learner's true capacity to deal with graphic symbolic language. Even more to the point, too many of us have at times taken the next step and made what appeared to be a logical inference, concluding that an inability to deal with graphic symbols mirrors a deep-seated and total lack of comprehension—an inability to interpret accurately *any* form of symbolic communication.

That such is not the case is obvious to anyone who goes beyond isolated test scores or superficial responses to questions which may or may not be within the experiential grasp of the learner. When one takes the time to examine carefully each incorrect response to discover its cause, or delivers the comprehen-

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sion passage to the learner orally, there invariably occurs a change in the maturity of response given by the learner. The cause for this discrepancy, and the resulting misinterpretation of the learner's ability, appears to be due to the incorrect assumption on which reading-comprehension questions of all types are based. They assume that the learner, who appears to be able to decode and encode oral language at a particular level of facility, can automatically associate meaning with print at the same level, even when he reads it himself. That such an ability is not automatic becomes more apparent each day as the number of reading failures continues to grow.

My purpose here is not to discuss at length the precise meaning of "reading comprehension," but to outline a technique—the rehearsal technique—found to be useful with older children manifesting the negative effects generally associated with this condition. However, a brief discussion of the *reasons* underlying its development is essential. Rehearsal is based on a long period of research and experience with the disabled, an experience which has led this teacher-researcher to draw a number of conclusions at odds with what many educators feel lies at the root of comprehension and other types of reading problems.

For the sake of brevity, let it suffice to say that the rehearsal technique under discussion is based on three contentions:

1. That the chief reason for lack of comprehension and other types of reading problems lies, in most cases, in the child's inability to make meaningful associations between the spoken word and the printed word during the initial stages of his decoding and encoding experiences in school.
2. That the cause for the continuation and even exacerbation of these initial difficulties is often related to the development of anxiety. Such anxiety results from continued exposure to graphic symbols in the face of frustration at the lowest levels of perceptual functioning, and is caused by the learner's inability to develop adequate processing skills, especially those involving sequence, memory, association, and discrimination. The result is aggression, regression, apathy, and fixation.
3. That the most useful method for removing this anxiety and the language problems associated with it is the application of remedial techniques which emphasize the improvement of the learner's qualitative response to graphic

symbols. Achievement of this goal should be predicated on these three conditions:

- A teaching-learning atmosphere free from anxiety resulting from the learner's persistently faulty responses to graphic symbols. An atmosphere in which the commission of errors is inhibited as completely as possible, and new and correct responses substituted.
- The use of procedures and devices designed to help the learner receive rapid and accurate feedback concerning the correctness or incorrectness of his responses to graphic symbols.
- A systematic approach to instruction which is as sequenced, hierarchic, and integrated as possible, given the learner's ability.

A Faster Technique

Rehearsal is one procedure which has already proved to be extremely useful with numerous cases of reading comprehension problems, including those with both moderate and severe involvement. Significantly, this improvement has been achieved in substantially less time than in the past. Much of the procedure is already incorporated in the *Johnny Right to Read Program*, which has been developed at the Granville Learning Center under the direction of Phillip Trembley, and which is presently being tested in a number of schools in New York State.

Essential, if one is to understand the rationale underlying this approach, is an understanding of the relationship between learning to speak and learning to read. Henry Smith and Emerald Dechant have defined reading as "the perception of graphic symbols. It is the process of relating graphic symbols to the reader's fund of knowledge."¹ Thus, reading, at least during the early stages of exposure to the printed word in the school, is in reality a sophisticated extension of orally produced and comprehended symbolic communication. To the point when the child arrives at school, his linguistic "fund of knowledge" was derived through his experience with sounds and gestures until meaningful associations were made, allowing him to associate these sounds and gestures with their concrete counterparts. Subsequently, these associations were internalized and used as symbolic meaning-bearers.

Thus, it is absolutely essential that the child extend his already well-developed associational ability with auditory sym-

bols to the area of graphic symbols. Such an association and transfer is fundamental if he is to draw on his "fund of knowledge" in the development of decoding and encoding facility with alphabetic symbols.

As the first of the preceding contentions stated, I believe that this association has not been made at all in many severe cases of disability, and has been made only partially in numerous others. This failure to associate graphic symbols with auditory symbols has caused a significant disruption of the learner's capacity to develop reciprocal transfer of meaning between the auditory and visual symbolic areas of cognitive function. It is this failure to develop reciprocity of transfer that is held to lie at the root of many problems of reading comprehension.

The child who fails to gain facility in associating and transferring symbolic data, normally resulting from continuous sensory input and output, does not develop a well-integrated system for dealing with graphic language. He is the child whose oral reading is replete with errors, including reversals, omissions, substitutions, hesitations, inattention to punctuation, poor phrasing, and faulty intonation. He persists in committing these errors without having apparently heard his own incorrect vocal output. He is unable to correct himself in the same way he does when he makes a normal speaking error. In short, he is behaving illogically and not using data received through his own auditory input system, data which are essential for intelligible oral reading.

Thus, a condition initiated during the earliest stages of the child's exposure to reading continues and frequently worsens during the period when facility should normally develop. If this condition persists and becomes reinforced by repeated practice, it seems eminently logical that it will be carried over into the learner's attempts to sublimate speech and read silently. For the learner who has not developed facility in the oral production of graphic symbols when this sublimation of speech occurs, it is highly improbable that he will internalize anything different when he reads the same language silently and "hears" it with an inner ear.

The rehearsal technique has been developed over the past three years and is designed to alleviate anxiety—especially fixated responses to graphic symbols. Rehearsal is therapy that can be applied at almost any level or in any classroom structure, if the teacher understands fully the need for the learner to develop facility in the essential process areas involved in dealing with

graphic symbols. For the therapy to succeed, the learner must develop the ability to monitor his own reading by using sensory feedback transmitted and received while reading.

Two Basic Tenets

In applying the rehearsal technique, it is useful to keep in mind the two basic tenets designated by N. R. F. Maier, a pioneer in the field of treating stereotyped anxiety reactions, as being helpful in restoring to normal the learner's inherent behavioral capacities.² Maier held that during therapy, when the learner must be taken through formerly frustrating experiences which have usually caused him to err, he should be: prevented from committing the formerly fixated and usually incorrect response; and aided in making an alternative and more adaptive response to the stimuli provided in the learning situation.

Thus, the object of rehearsing the learner in a reading exercise is to prepare him *before* the actual experience in an effort to lessen his anxiety and permit him to respond more logically and effectively. Only to the extent that the teacher can draw from the learner a good performance *qualitatively* will the instruction be successful. The more often the learner can demonstrate a high level of quality in his response to graphic symbols, without the anxiety normally associated with the reading act, the more rapid will be his overall development.

Key to the Technique

The key to the rehearsal technique, and essential for maximum efficiency, is a recording device for use by both student and teacher. It is needed to supply the learner with constant feedback as to the accuracy and quality of his reading performance. Such feedback lies at the heart of improving the auditory and visual transfer systems. As long as the learner is allowed to persist in his habitually incorrect responses to graphic symbols, his reading will remain inadequate.

Materials for this procedure abound on the market. In fact, virtually any reading passage may be used if the teacher understands the problem and the remedial procedures to be used. Because of the large numbers of students involved in my own work, I have found several professionally prepared materials to be excellent for my purposes, such as the selections in the *Reading for Concepts Series*³—a series of high-interest selections, designed for use at a variety of interest and age levels, which have a carefully prepared set of comprehension questions accompanying each selection.

Six Basic Steps

The objective of the rehearsal technique is to assist the learner in developing and improving the processes necessary for accurate and consistent reception of visual input and its subsequent association with data already received, understood, and available for retrieval—in short, for easy association with the learner's already existing "fund of knowledge." The technique has six steps:

- *Step 1:* The learner should be informed of the aims of the rehearsal procedure at the outset of instruction. He should understand that the purpose is to help him reach the same level of competency of interpretation with printed language that he already possesses in his dealings with spoken language. To achieve this end, the teacher selects an interesting but simple passage to be read. He then chooses six to ten words he believes may be unknown to the learner, either in terms of decoding or meaning association. These words are then discussed in terms of their structure and, more significantly, in terms of the context in which they will appear in the selection to be read. It is during this stage that the teacher attempts to help the learner improve his awareness of the consistent structural relationships that exist throughout the language at all levels—not with isolated words, but with symbols relevant to the exercise that is to follow. The time spent on this phase will depend on the learner's overall ability in the area of word attack and contextual vocabulary development. The discussion should be as informal and stimulating as possible, even to the point of the teacher doing most of the reading of the words during the first few sessions in the effort to arouse the student's interest. Once the words have been discussed fully and the learner has demonstrated at least partial facility at pronouncing them (with as much cueing as the teacher deems necessary) the teacher proceeds to the next step.
- *Step 2:* At this point the teacher, after having familiarized himself with the content of the passage, discusses the selection with the learner, giving him as much background as possible to prepare him fully for the reading that is to follow. After this discussion, the teacher reads the selection aloud to the learner, permitting him to follow the reading visually if he wishes. The emphasis at this point, however, should be on helping the learner to attend as carefully as possible to the listening experience itself. After the reading, the discussion may be continued if the teacher or the learner

desires. When the potential for further understanding of the selection has been exhausted, the next step may be initiated.

• *Step 3:* The learner is asked to read the first paragraph of the selection. His reading is recorded, with help given as needed without hesitation or reproof. Immediately after the reading, the recording is played for the learner. He is constantly encouraged to observe the print he is listening to as it is read, in the effort to improve his one-to-one association between the visual and auditory data he is examining. At each error the teacher stops the recording and indicates to the learner the nature of his error and the means for correcting it. All types of errors should be indicated and discussed, including reversals, substitutions, omissions, mispronunciations, inattention to punctuation, poor phrasing, and lack of proper intonation. In short, every error is discussed that contributes to the learner's inability to make useful associations between spoken language, graphic language, and the well-developed "fund of knowledge" available to him.

• *Step 4:* After this discussion of the reader's performance, the learner is encouraged to reread the same paragraph to discover for himself if he has indeed profited from the instruction and discussion. He is urged to listen to the second reading and make a comparison for himself. If there is no noticeable improvement (which occurs in some severe cases) the learner should be counseled that change does not always occur immediately. He should be strongly encouraged to persist in his efforts. After this has been done, the learner is encouraged to continue reading the remainder of the passage, so he will have sufficient knowledge of it for a discussion of the questions to follow. If the learner balks or indicates anxiety, the teacher should volunteer to read the remainder of the selection while the learner listens.

• *Step 5:* After the reading is completed, the learner is encouraged to try reading the comprehension questions. The teacher should try to help the learner bring the same facility to the questions that he attempted during the reading of the selection itself, since the same degree of associative skill is essential in both places. The teacher must attempt consistently to instruct the disabled learner how to go about answering comprehension questions. It is too often forgotten that a child who has never learned to read material with facility has had even less experience in developing the skills needed for seeking out answers concerning the material which he couldn't read in the first place.

He must be shown, in the simplest manner possible, exactly what is meant by the various types of comprehension questions and the precise procedures to be used in obtaining a correct answer. He must be shown *how* to scan for specific information questions and *how* to develop a set of operational procedures for answering sequence questions; and he must be led to operational facility in the complex mechanisms the mature reader uses in discovering the main ideas or "best titles" of selections read.

In short, even when the learner improves his reading somewhat, the teacher must not assume that he will *automatically* be able to bring the same comprehension skills he demonstrates for spoken language to graphic symbolic language. He must be aided even to this extent.

• *Step 6:* The teacher should keep careful records of the learner's specific problems, both in reading the passage itself and in answering the questions. Although this procedure is best suited to individual instruction, it can easily be used for groups, once the group understands the intent of the technique. Thus, the class can play the same role as the teacher in discussing the material and correcting each other's errors. If this becomes too unwieldy, the groups can be paired-off, with the teacher playing the role of facilitator.

The greatest value of the rehearsal technique occurs after the learner has begun to understand that he can learn to monitor his own reading and make his own corrections. At some point, it becomes possible for him to attack a passage alone, rehearse it, and record it as many times as necessary to achieve a quality that satisfies him. He can eventually develop the kind of insight he needs to break the habits established earlier in his development, habits which are still exercising a disproportionate influence. It has been my own experience that as soon as the learner begins to observe his own errors and correct them himself, a significant point is reached, one which will end in rehabilitation if the learner's motivation can be continued long enough. I have, at least in a few cases, been able to develop this ability after only a few treatment sessions.

NOTES

1. Henry P. Smith and Emerald V. Dechant, *Psychology in Teaching Reading* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 44.
2. N. R. F. Maier, *Frustration* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1961).
3. William Liddle (ed.), *Reading for Concepts Series* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).

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Deeply theoretical yet eminently practical are twin descriptors that accurately describe all of Mr. Raymond's Laurita's work, especially this short but powerful essay presenting an effective method for helping students with problems in the area of reading comprehension.

Allow me to lift one sentence from this essay which penetrates to the heart of students' problems with comprehension, **"This failure to associate graphic symbols with auditory symbols has caused a significant disruption of the learner's capacity to develop reciprocal transfer of meaning between the auditory areas of cognitive function. It is this failure to develop reciprocity of transfer that is held to lie at the root of many problems of reading comprehension."**

Mr. Laurita's basic approach is to help the student monitor his errors in an active yet stress free manner. The student will tape his reading of a passage and then play it back, listening for any errors that need to be corrected. In the initial stages, the teacher will listen with the student and assist him as necessary. Every error is noted, analyzed, and corrected. It is essential that the student

This Rehearsal Technique is very similar to the approach developed by Helen Lowe in the late 1940's. See her essays on my web site, www.donpotter.net. Lowe recorded over 100,000 misreadings and carefully analyzed and classified them. The students studied these errors to see what they needed to do to keep from making them. This increased their reading abilities, especially comprehension.

Several other essays by Mr. Laurita can be downloaded for free on the www.donpotter.net web site. They have guided my teaching and enabled me to become a much better teacher of both beginning and remedial students.

Many free phonics programs for helping students learn to read correctly by learning to associate graphics symbols (letters) with auditory symbols (phonemes) that will enable them to develop reciprocal transfer of meaning between the auditory areas of cognitive function can be found on the Education Page of my web site: www.donpotter.net.

Also visit my www.blendphonics.org website for a free, proven phonics method that is easy enough for anyone to teach yet powerful enough to teach anyone to read.