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Errors Children Make in Reading, by Raymond E. Laurita

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The opportunity for observing at first hand some of the marvelous subtlety of the human mind presents itself when one works with the disabled reader in close and continued contact for a protracted period. On hearing the errors of these unfortunate children, the first impulse is to attribute them to a lack of intelligence or even some form of mental aberration. The linguistic monstrosities these children perpetrate appear to be without semblance of logic or consistency.

Perhaps the most difficult problem of the remedial therapist lies in resisting the temptation to become discouraged or worse, to fall prey to the evil of pre-judgment, a curse that places understanding and inquisitiveness to observe and seek out meaning amidst the jumble of inaccuracies and confusions that are the legacy of reading retardation, the reward is considerable. It has been my experience that in the great majority of cases there are simple and extremely logical explanations for most of the errors children make.

The primary cause of reading difficulties in virtually all of the over 700 cases of reading disability I have treated over the years was related to difficulties the child encountered in attempting to cope with the problems imposed by whole configurations. This has been true not only for those children exposed to a predominately whole word approach but also for many children who have had considerable exposure to linguistic and phonics approaches. Children who are experiencing difficulty with whole configurations will persist in this difficulty until they have developed a degree of perceptual maturity which will enable them to see, hear and remember total configurations.

A cardinal rule educators profess to follow is the theory of readiness-of never exposing children to learning experiences before they have developed sufficient maturity and skills to cope with the new learning experience. Unfortunately for millions of illiterates, this rule has been broken consistently in the past and continues to be broken today on a national scale. Each year, we in education persist in the practice of asking children in the earliest stages of their learning experience to perceive letter groupings in the form of whole words before they are adequately prepared for this most complex of perceptual experiences.

When a child is exposed to a whole word configuration such as "could" for example, without sufficient preparation, we are literally opening a Pandora's Box of possible confusions. Prior to asking the child to learn this highly irregular and abstract word, certain precautions should have been taken. For example, these questions ought to have been answered. Is the child viewing the word in a consistently left-right manner? Is he aware of each of the individual letters which comprise the word? Has he some understanding of the nature and usage of this word? Is he aware of the fact that altho the word has five individual letters, it is composed of only three distinct sounds? Has he the capacity to perceive "gestalt" with regard to total configurations? If we have been remiss in discovering the child's readiness in these areas of essential preparation, then we have failed to find out if the child is indeed capable of performing the task set out for him.

To the immature child who hasn't developed adequate visual and auditory identity and association between individual language symbols and the words they form, the word "could" will undoubtedly be confused later with a variety of configurations; among them: *cold, called, cloud, canned, cooled, clawed, cord, would, should*, etc. The progression that a confused child follows in reaching a state of complete frustration is inversely proportional to the speed with which he is able to develop exceptional powers of visual discrimination, and visual memory in order to cope with the increasingly complex needs of learning whole word configurations. It isn't difficult for the more than casual observer to understand why so many children become reading problems. They simply cannot cope fast enough with the need to learn numerous and unrelated whole word configurations on a purely visual basis.

It must be remembered that children who learn by the sight method, and this constitutes the majority of children in the United States, have been scientifically conditioned during the initial exposure period to a learning experience which by its very nature elicits a purely visual response to a configuration without assistance from auditory clues. No sincere educator can pretend that this initial exposure period hasn't a most profound and enduring effect on the immature child, for by a series of carefully arranged stimulus-response activities, he has been literally conditioned to a visual, configurational attack on language. The result is inevitable.

The claim that auditory elements are systematically taught *later* by means of an analytical approach has very little meaning for the child who has been conditioned to responding automatically to visual configurations. There is very little instruction in phonics in the first year of school when an analytical method is used that is of any real value, for the practice factor has to be missing. Most books the child is exposed to are not structured to consistently elicit responses to auditory clues but rely instead on the use of learned visual configurations. Auditory association practice is isolated and limited to unrealistic exercises not associated with the "real" reading done in the classroom, at least not in the mind of the child.

The argument of those who persist in exposing all children indiscriminately to a visual configurational attack is usually based on post-facto reasoning, for they tend to cite the large numbers of children who have learned to read without first making auditory and visual associations with the individual letters of the alphabet. It is my belief and that of others that children who learn to read using a gestalt approach which exposes them to whole word configurations at the outset, are children who have had either *prior preparation* which prepared them for the experience or are those children gifted with *better than average* capacities of visual perception, discrimination and memory. And further, that they develop intuitively, satisfactory powers of auditory sorting and organization which assist them in attacking unknown configurations.

Alex Bannatyne writing in *The Disabled Reader*, [1] states "This latter method, commonly called look-and-say, may be effective with those two thirds of first- and second-grade pupils who are sufficiently gifted in the realm of language to be able to learn to read quickly. I believe that these verbally capable children rapidly teach themselves to analyze words phonetically in spite of a deliberate nonphonetic approach on the part of the teacher. That this is so can easily be tested by asking children who have learned to read well using the look-and-say method to sound out difficult words; this they usually do quite competently. Incidentally, because these capable

children learn phonics anyway, all beginner classes might as well learn through a phonetic technique from the outset. While the rapid learners may gain only a little, there is no doubt that the less competent could be saved a lot of prolonged difficulty and perhaps much unhappiness.”

The subtlety and infinite diversity of the errors that the child becomes subject to in his developing confusion have to be seen to be believed. A few examples here from the many observed each day will serve to illustrate the point. In a recent lesson, a child who had been receiving remedial instruction for an extended period by means of a structured synthetic approach continued to make numerous errors of substitution, attesting to the persistence of early confusion. He responded to the configuration “*loud*” with the response “*long*” Because of the child’s long history of discrimination and reversal difficulty, an explanation for this mistake was easily deduced. The total configuration of these common words is very similar; in addition, the child had made two discrimination errors in reversing the *u* to an *n* and the *d* for the *g*. The latter reversal may be difficult to understand until it is remembered that the manuscript form of the *g* is the vertical reverse of the *d*. The same child later responded similarly when he referred to the name *Chub* as *Chug*, this time rotationally reversing the shapes of *b* and *g*.

Another example saw a child respond to the word “*grab*” with the response “*drag*.” This is an extremely common type of error for it has in addition to the visual confusion an overlay of confused auditory association. The consonant blends *gr* and *dr* are extremely difficult to differentiate for the child with inadequate auditory perception and discrimination. The two sounds are very similar as are the lip movements which are made to create them. In addition to the auditory confusion and the close configurational pattern of the two words, the child was also reversing the initial and final consonants. This child also referred to a “*furry*” animal as a “*funny*” animal and read about a character who went swimming in the “*winter*” instead of in the “*water*.” Both of these errors had a configurational base with the error involving the words *furry* and *funny* complicated by a discrimination confusion between the *n* and the *r*. This child also made the following progression in mistaking the word “*Oh*.” He went from *oh* to *on* to *no* and finally concluded the series with *not*.

These confusions are not extreme examples of severely disabled children but are instead rather common samples that every remedial teacher will meet on a given day if the time is taken to record the mistakes children make. A more complete and comprehensive compilation of errors of this kind can be found elsewhere [2] but anyone wishing to develop his own list need simply find the first available remedial student, have him read a few passages and a new and different set of confused yet logically explainable responses will be forthcoming. Because of the inadequate nature of the traditional alphabet, the irregular spelling of the language and the almost universal use of a visual, configurational approach as an initial teaching technique, the number of variations is infinite.

There is another variation to the multitude of possible errors children are forced into by too early exposure to whole configurations. It is an error associated with all gradations of reading difficulty, even cropping up in the reading of capable students. It isn’t generally considered serious by most parents and teachers but it is actually either a residual manifestation of earlier difficulty or may portend future problems in the area of word attack.

Often a child will read a sentence such as: “The little boy went into the jungle and saw a big giraffe.” and substitute for the last word: *elephant*, *rhinoceros*, *hippopotamus* or even *dinosaur*. Most adults fail to realize the subtle yet logical cause for this kind of mistake. It is really very logical for the child who has been conditioned to respond to visual stimuli. He isn’t thinking in terms of auditory clues, rather he is sure only that the little boy has seen some kind of large jungle animal. Unless he is a capable, linguistically talented child, his auditory associational training hasn’t prepared him for a total attack on the word, thus why shouldn’t it be a *hippopotamus*, *elephant*, *rhinoceros* or even a *dinosaur*. They are all “big” words in terms of size; they are all large animals and to the small child the possibility of a dinosaur residing in the depths of the jungle is a distinct possibility.

A different situation occurs when children with adequate vision are exposed to increasingly smaller print and more involved vocabulary in the form of new and more complicated material. Often children when placed in this situation will make responses which seem to have no relationship with the material being read. On close examination the mistakes do not appear to be reversals, substitutions or discrimination errors. When seeking explanations for this kind of problem, the wise teacher will begin focusing attention on the area of print directly above and below the point of the error. It has been my experience that many children have not developed sufficient visual maturity to remain visually fixated at all times and often substitute words or phrases of similar configuration from as far away as three or four lines above or below. These errors are often difficult to detect since the child is unconscious of what has happened and usually returns to the original point of reading without any apparent interruption in the flow of the material being read. The child simply slips from one line to the other, taking a word from here, a phrase from there until he has lost the thread of what he is reading and consequently appears to have poor comprehension.

This type of error tho difficult to detect is relatively simple to correct. Of course, if the difficulty is gross or persists after attempts at correction, then an eye examination is in order, but in most cases the use of a line marker for a brief training period until the child has developed improved control and stability is sufficient therapy. For more severe cases tachistoscopic training has proven useful with certain students. The notion that the child will become dependent on a line marker appears to have little substance in practice. Close observation and occasional testing will be adequate for almost any teacher to discover when the training period has been completed. I have found that large numbers of disabled readers need some kind of line marker or guide to assist them in maintaining place into the second grade and sometimes beyond.

A final example of difficulty that remedial children have been observed to manifest is one that probably has its inception somewhere in the earliest language experiences of the child but which has been found to be present in large numbers of remedial children. Many problem children find it difficult or nearly impossible in some cases to remember, unfamiliar auditory configurations. These children appear to have been deprived of linguistic experiences at a crucial developmental period which would have assisted them in developing the facility most normal children manifest with new words. To the child who has not an almost absolute facility with individual auditory components and who hasn’t had vast and varied experience in putting them together in varying combinations, words such as *Canaveral* and *Caribbean* can prove to be both baffling and frustrating. Children with this kind of difficulty can be taught a word numerous times, observe

and hear it frequently throughout a story or lesson and yet continue to be unable to remember its exact auditory configuration and consequent pronunciation.

A recent example will serve to illustrate. A child who has been undergoing therapy for almost two years came to the name *Clarence* in a paragraph. Being unable to solve the word, I attempted to help by breaking it up into smaller components and then have the child pronounce the individual parts as a whole. First I wrote the letters *Clar* on the board and had the boy pronounce them, which he did exactly. Then to try and simplify the final group of letters, I broke them into the parts *en* and the final *ce* pronounced with the *s* sound. Again the boy responded perfectly. Yet when he attempted to recreate the entire word, the best he could come up with was *Clarsen*. The boy had made an auditory reversal between the sound of *en* and the *s*, pronouncing the final syllable *sen* instead of *ence*. Typical of children with this form of disability, he perseverated in his error and at the conclusion of the lesson, after having pronounced the word correctly numerous times, he once again referred to the *Clarence* in the story as *Clarsen*.

Remedying such a problem is most difficult and the longer therapy is delayed the less chance there remains of complete rehabilitation. Once again, methods which delay assisting the child in associating individual sound components with specific visual representations and the giving of extensive and meaningful practice in combining these units, isn't in the best interests of the child, especially those with the kind of difficulty just described. The more practice children have in combining round symbols, even in combining them into nonsense units, the better. Methods which focus attention on individual sound units prior to or simultaneous with instruction in visual configurations and which give consistent practice in this activity are vastly superior for children with poor auditory facility.

Observing a child who has lost some of this marvelous human capacity to respond with reasoning and logic, is a terribly depressing sight, and when one considers the number of times that human frailty in the form of faulty teaching and inadequate methodology has been the cause of this loss, the situation takes on the aspects of a tragedy. When it becomes impossible to observe logic in the errors normal children make, it may be assumed with certainty that they are severely disabled and recovery will come only when complete and comprehensive rehabilitation has been administered for a long time. That facilities for this kind of rehabilitation are grossly inadequate to cope with the problem of reading retardation in the United States is a national disgrace.

Bibliography

- [1] Money, J., Editor, *The Disabled Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press. 1966
- [2] Laurita, R., A Basic Sight Vocabulary - a Help or a Hindrance?, *Spelling Progress Bulletin* Summer, 1966

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter
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It has been my pleasure to publish several essays written by Mr. Raymond Laurita. Recently Mr. Laurita decided to close down his website (www.spellingdoctor.com.) This web site has been a major source of information on the best methods for teaching spelling for quite some time. My web site, www.donpotter.net features a number of Mr. Laurita's essays. The essay, "A Basic Sight Vocabulary – a Help or a Hindrance?," that is mentioned in the "Bibliography" is available as a free PDF document on my web site. I highly recommend that the readers of this essay read that one also. There are three essays on my web site by Helen Lowe which explore in-depth the patterns of student errors that Mr. Laurita discusses in this article.

Phonics methods that can successfully prevent and remediate the very cases that Ray mentions in this article are available as **FREE e-books** on my web site www.donpotter.net. I especially recommend the following:

1. Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery*.
2. The Hegge-Kirk-Kirk 1936 *Remedial Reading Drills*.
3. Noah Webster's 1824 *American Spelling Book*
4. Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy in First Grade with Blend Phonics*. This book, if taught **first** to students who are perceptually ready, would virtually end illiteracy in America.