A group dynamic method of learning to read

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1. Introduction

In the field of teaching reading, there has been a strong focus on method and the search for a method that will be a key to the solution of numerous problems (some real and others not so real) in the teaching of reading.

Teachers whose focus is on the student rather than on the method discover that there is no one method that will serve all the various contexts and persons who are learning to read. The student's expectations and perceptions of what literacy is, play a large part in method considerations.

In the course of teaching Crow literacy, I utilized both formal approaches (the Gudschinsky method, for example) and informal approaches (the Language Experience approach, for example).

In the fall of 1972, I experimented with an informal approach used with a group of Crow speakers who were meeting regularly to translate the Gospel of Mark. I shared this approach in the 1970s in a number of SIL literacy methods courses both at Norman and at Dallas, as well as in literacy seminars and consultant sessions, but had never provided a description in written form.

2. Description

Between six and fifteen Crow speakers gathered weekly for translation sessions and worked around a long table. Each of them was bilingual in English and Crow, and had some basic reading ability in English. At the beginning of the session, I read the Crow translated material of the previous session and

the group reviewed and discussed it. Since none of the participants had more than a brief initial exposure to written forms in Crow, I took the opportunity to provide some basic literacy instruction. Each participant was given a copy of the text and I read the text orally to the group. I noticed that the participants were tracking as I read. I was fairly certain that most of them recognized at least some forms. I decided to test their skills to try to determine just what forms these new readers might recognize. After having read the text once (usually a TEV-type episode), I explained that I was going to reread the text and would stop at some point. They were to read orally together the next word in the text.

I then reread the text, stopping at forms that I assumed could be easily recognized from their English reading skills or words that held particular emotive content or were salient for some other reason.

On the first pass, the group responded immediately and in unison. They recognized this right away as a game.

I then read the text a second time, stopping at new points as well as those used previously. Again, response was good and interest appeared high. I stopped the repetition before I felt boredom set in, but there seemed to be a very high tolerance for repetition. Several expressed to me that they were enjoying it. At the close of the session, each participant left with a copy of the text. This literacy part of the session lasted only 15 to 20 minutes.

The following week I repeated what I had done the previous week, with good results. The third week, I handed out the text and asked the group to look at it silently while others came in and were getting settled. Individuals began pointing to forms and asking one another what they were. By the time everyone was settled, they were eager to play the game.

I anticipated what was to come, so I read the first pass slowly, stopping at forms for their response. As I read, participants began to read with me in unison, guessing where there was uncertainty. The atmosphere shifted from the stiffness of a formal classroom to the gaiety of a quilt-making party.

I stopped reading and before I realized what had happened, I discovered that the game had reversed itself. The group was doing the reading and I was responding, only at points where the readers were having difficulty. The slower readers were too late to pronounce the forms, but were deeply involved in following the text, in an effort to participate whenever they could in the oral reading. We went through the page two to three times. Repetition was no apparent problem.

As weeks went by, slower readers were able to participate more fully and faster readers were rapidly developing their reading vocabulary.

At points where the entire group could not proceed, I took the opportunity to make a teaching point based on what I perceived to be the difficulty. At times, I presented a Gudschinsky-type drill on the board. At other times, I drew attention to forms of similar shape on the page and made contrasts. Since rhythmic patterns were often the problem, special attention was given to eliciting rhythm pattern sets that shared similar distributions of syllable length and placement of pitch accent.

In a matter of three months, most of the participants became fully independent skilled readers. This was in contrast to many months of formalized classroom instruction as part of a bilingual education teacher-aide training program that, in general, failed to produce independent, confident readers.

3. Detailed description of the technique

This approach can be implemented whenever a skilled reader is available who understands the basic procedures. I have never trained a teacher for this approach, but I do not anticipate that it would be difficult to learn, based on my experience with native readers. The teacher must, of course, be accepted in that role by the students.

The procedures can be defined as a sequence of steps:

Step 1. Hand out printed text to the students. One page of material is adequate in the early stages.

Step 2. Allow some time for readers to look at the sheet and become familiar with the layout of the page and the appearance of the words.

Step 3. The teacher explains that he will read the text and the students are to follow along on the page. When the material has been read (perhaps at a slow pace) the teacher asks the students if they were able to follow. If a number seemed to have become lost, the teacher rereads the material, perhaps pausing a moment between sentences to allow students to find the place again.

Step 4. When the students succeed in tracking, the teacher explains that he will stop somewhere on the page. When he does, the students are expected to read the next word orally as a group. The teacher selects a word which is both relatively simple to recognize and which also occurs several times in the text. The teacher consistently stops only before the selected word. As the teacher works through this step, he monitors the readers to determine whether the students understand the game. If things are not yet clearly understood, the teacher repeats this step.

Step 5. When the students understand Step 4, the teacher rereads the page, selecting one or more forms at which to stop. The students respond orally, as a group, whenever the teacher stops.
If students find a form difficult, or if a form stimulates discussion of a problem, the teacher provides some explicit instruction, perhaps by comparing forms as in a Gudschinsky drill, or by explaining a feature of the orthography. In any case, the instruction must be kept short and the subject of discussion must be only the problem at hand. The teacher should avoid being distracted from the exercise to provide lengthy explanations or instruction. It is important not to lose the group activity focus.
The teacher must be alert to when students are tiring and must then bring the session to a close. The interest span will, of course, differ among students. Motivation can be maintained more easily when sessions are closed, while students still have some desire to go on. The appropriate span will lengthen as students gain more skill.

Step 6. Repeat Step 5, adding more forms as they become familiar. Up to this point, the same page or short text is used. This allows students to become very familiar with the text, a situation which frees them to take risks or make guesses. At this point, some students will be able to speak a word from memory rather than reading it. This is fine. It provides an experience of success that is rewarding to the student.
The teacher must monitor whether the students tire of the same text. Most students enjoy the repetition and this is helpful to the slower students.

Step 7. Continue the process, gradually increasing the stopping points.
At some point, if the class atmosphere has been one of encouragement, students are likely to begin to move ahead of the teacher. They may begin to read phrases, or even continue to the end of a sentence. After a number of sessions, students may begin reading together as soon as the material is passed out.

Step 8. When the teacher feels it appropriate, he encourages the students to reverse the process. They read the text in unison, stopping only when they fail to recognize a form. The teacher then assists in the recognition, using drills and other indirect word recognition strategies to assist the readers.
At the close of each session, students take with them the material used in the session. It is not uncommon for students to become teachers in the context of the home as they share the material with their family.

4. Cautions

There are several cautions:

1. As with any activity in the community, it is important that the leader be sensitive to the cultural factors involved. An understanding of group social behavior and expectancies is crucial, prior to attempting this approach. Such factors include the dynamics of the group and leadership within it, preferences of the students, the physical arrangement of the setting, and so forth. Experience has shown among the Crow, that the process is perceived as a game and there is a great deal of enjoyment and excitement in the learning experience. It should not be assumed that this will be the case for all cultures.

2. The group effect may be lost in a group of under four participants. If the group is too small, there may be a lack of leadership or there may be a hesitancy to respond together. In other words, individual performance would be too noticeable for their comfort. The opposite may also occur. One individual may dominate the process and the group effect will be lost. Seek to enlarge the group or rebuild a group in another context.

3. The process may require a considerable amount of material in a short time (three to five sessions). If readers catch on quickly, they consume volumes of material in a matter of minutes and look for more. Elicit from the group what type of material they enjoy (Scripture, native texts, folklore, and so forth).

4. One student may show far more ability than others. Once that student really proves his skills and is recognized by others as a leader, encourage him to function as leader and do the guide reading and stopping, if culturally appropriate. One must take care to observe cultural patterns of leadership, lest the potential leader be set up for failure.

5. Formal instruction should be kept to an absolute minimum. If carried much beyond the form at hand, it detracts from the process itself and interrupts the flow and excitement of learning. Questions should be recognized and handled, as long as the response will serve the entire group and as long as group interest is maintained.

5. Adapting the approach

A positive characteristic of the approach is the ease with which variations can be introduced. The following are some of the parameters that may vary:

1. **The nature of the material.** Since the process does not require a book (mimeo or photocopy sheets are generally used), a change in the material can be made at any point.

2. **The amount of repetition.** Most groups seem to tolerate a high degree of repetition and this tends to strengthen the learning process through familiarity. Use of memory through repetition does not weaken the learning process; it strengthens it.

3. **The ability of the student.** There may be a wide variation of ability in the group, but this does not seem to adversely affect the process. Those with little skill often sit quietly, as they develop confidence, while the more advanced students do the oral responding. Some students may never respond with the group. The fact that their interest is maintained is generally an indicator of learning. Some learn to read well who never participate in the group responses.

6. Summary

Although, to my knowledge, this approach has not been applied very widely, it has proven to be very effective. Some of its positive characteristics are as follows:

1. No individual stands out; cooperation rather than competition is dominant; participants feel a sense of helping one another.

2. The pace is controlled and readily adaptable to the readers.

3. Participation may be active or passive; the student is free to choose how active he will be in the session.

4. There is controlled repetition of material; this is often a feature of local learning styles.

5. Meaning is always central; students are never reading without comprehension; formal explanation is minimal.

6. The approach is flexible as to material; sheets of printed texts are all that is needed. No special preparation is required beyond simple copy production.

7. The process obscures the student versus teacher roles; the teacher serves more as a guide than as an instructor.