Predictable books for preliterate peoples

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[Topics: literacy materials, predictable books]

1. Introduction

According to Webster, to predict means "to declare in advance, to foretell on the basis of observation, experience, or scientific reason." Predictable books are those books which are so written that the reader can foretell both what the author is going to say and how it will be said. Kenneth Goodman (1967:127) refers to prediction as "the ability to anticipate":

> … reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game. It involves an interaction between thought and language. Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time. The ability to anticipate that which has not been seen, of course, is vital in reading ….

Elsewhere, Goodman (1972) speaks of the "*axiom of predictability:* a given sequence will be easy to read to the extent that what the reader is most likely to predict actually occurs …" (1972:153).

Frank Smith (1979) defines prediction as "the prior elimination of unlikely alternatives …. More informally, prediction is a matter of asking questions" (1979:85).

Constance Weaver (1980) views a dichotomy between what she terms the *skills* approach to reading acquisition and the psycholinguistic emphasis on the development of *strategies.* She sees the former as a word-centered approach where children are encouraged to use their inventory of sight words, their

(1990). *Notes on Literacy, 63*.

knowledge of phonics and structural analysis skills, and only incidentally their knowledge of context, as aids in word identification. On the other hand, the meaning-centered strategies approach encourages prediction in that the beginning reader learns: 1) to predict the next item; 2) to sample the text (using a minimum of graphophonic cues); and 3) to use the following context to confirm or correct the original prediction.

Yetta Goodman and Carolyn Burke (1980:3–4) similarly suggest that the significant strategies a reader uses include the following:

1. Predicting, (reader selects cues and predicts material)

2. Confirming, (reader checks semantic and syntactic acceptability)

3. Integrating, (reader integrates meaning gained with his or her world view)

Goodman and Burke's third point is more comprehensive than Weaver's in that its focus is on what Rosenblatt (1978) terms the transactional nature of the reading process. Helen Dry (1983) simply describes the reader and the text as two halves of a whole.

Goodman and Burke (1980:10) go on to further clarify their view of prediction:

> A clear relationship between the language and meaning of the text, and the children's own language and knowledge, makes material predictable. The more this reading material reflects the whole and intensely meaningful language they use already, the more proficiently will they apply their accumulated language knowledge and world view to the construction of meaning.

For preliterate societies, this would imply that reading acquisition would be in the mother tongue of the aspiring learner. It may also suggest the need for materials which are linguistically and culturally within the experience of both the author and the readers. It has been found that readability formulas often do not accurately measure the difficulty of non-English materials. For this reason, Wendell along with colleagues in the Mexico Branch (1982:25–27) has proposed four stages as a means of judging the difficulty of such reading materials:

• Stage 1 content is completely familiar to reader and author

• Stage 2 content is new to reader, however it has been experienced personally by the author

• Stage 3 content is new to the reader and has been experienced only vicariously by the author

• Stage 4 content is new to reader and author, usually translated from another language by the "author"

For a book to be truly predictable for the beginning reader it needs to be Stage 1 material so that the author and reader share not only the same language, but the same schema.

One could cite numerous other evidences from the field of reading theory which would point towards the usefulness of predictable books; however, it may be profitable to turn briefly for a look at some other disciplines and at what they have to say to the issue.

2. Predictable books

2.A. From the point of view of *linguistics*

For the past few years, those who are on the forefront of linguistic study (for example, Halliday and Hasan 1976; Grimes 1975) have been looking at discourse structures. They have discovered that by looking at the structure of the whole, eventually the parts—even some of those parts which previously seemed unexplainable—begin to emerge as a meaningful part of the whole.

Much of the current work with story grammars has built on the foundation laid by those doing discourse analysis for English. However, more needs to be done in building on a knowledge of discourse when preparing reading materials for those languages which are only now being written down. It has been noted that in an effort to simplify materials, one of the first things many authors do is to remove many of the "useless" function words. This actually removes much of the redundancy and robs the new reader of those cues to prediction which he/she needs so desperately. Kenneth Goodman (1971) describes this phenomenon:

> If teachers doctor up language, if they select it in such a way that it turns out not to be language which is meaningful, or acts like language, then both the attempt to reconstruct the underlying language structure and the attempt to get at the meaning are frustrated and it becomes an experience in nonsense (1971:458).

> It is time that reading specialists and/or literacy workers began to build on the insights which have come from discourse analysis.

2.B. From the point of view of *psychology/psychiatry*

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) speaking as an educator and child therapist states the need to go beyond skills training and to look at the whole:

> I became deeply dissatisfied with much of the literature intended to develop the child's mind and personality, because it fails to stimulate and nurture those resources he needs most in order to cope with his difficult inner problems. The preprimers and primers from which he is taught to read in school are designed to teach the necessary skills, irrespective of meaning. The overwhelming bulk of the rest of so-called 'children's literature' attempts to entertain or to inform, or both. But most of these books are so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained from them. The acquisition of skills, including the ability to read, becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life (1976:4).

He goes on to suggest that "nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale" (1976:5). Later, he goes on to describe the reason fairy tales are so powerful:

> The delight we experience when we allow ourselves to respond to a fairy tale, the enchantment we feel, comes not from the psychological meaning of a tale (although this contributes to it) but from its literary qualities—the tale itself as a work of art. The fairy tale could not have its psychological impact on the child were it not first and foremost a work of art (1976:12).

It may be that part of what makes folk tales an art form is the predictability of the story, that is, the beauty of the pattern. In preliterate societies, folk tales are often the best source of predictable materials. In addition, they are one of the most important means for passing on cultural values to the younger generations. Specific types of predictability may differ from culture to culture and language to language. However, the person preparing reading materials needs to be aware of some of the different patterns of folklore. Kenneth and Mary Clarke (Carlson 1972 ix–x) clarify some terms used in referring to folklore:

> *Märchen* is a German term referring to stories of wonders in which lowly heroes win fame and fortune in an unreal world of improbable characters.

> A *fairy tale* is usually a story in which some supernatural force aids the hero or heroine in solving problems, for example, *Snow White and the seven dwarfs.*

> *Myths* are often stories of gods and supernatural beings which explain natural phenomena, for example, *Why the skunk has its odor.*

> A *legend* is a story about persons, places, or events involving a real or pretended belief or person, for example, *King Arthur.*

> A *fable* is an animal tale told with a moral purpose, for example, *Aesop's fables.*

> *Tall tales* are based on lies and exaggerations, for example, *Paul Bunyan.*

An awareness of the different types of folklore may help the preparer of reading materials to make better choices as to appropriate stories—and to avoid those which could cause problems. It would be well to note some cautions from the country of Colombia (Kondo and Wendell 1979:119–201), where the Yucunas have so many versions of a given story that persons cannot agree on any one version as being the right one. The Tucanos of Colombia believe that only the oldest man is able to tell the stories correctly. There is also some fear that their tribal secrets may be disclosed. In other places, stories may be too immoral or too gruesome for the general reader.

2.C. From the point of view of *anthropology*

Marvin K. Mayers (1974) contends that both individuals and societies may be placed on a values continuum between a dichotomizing and a holistic world view. Those on the dichotomizing end of the spectrum prefer that everything be black or white. They are interested in analyzing the parts and then want to know where the parts "fit." Those on the holistic side prefer to look at the whole. They focus on

parts only when those parts are in vital function within the whole. They are frustrated by situations where there is a need to consider one part without respect to the whole.

The Copala Trique, an Indian group of Mexico, are a clear example of a holistic culture, that is, one in which reading acquisition is best approached by focus on the whole:

> The Copala Trique consider language as a vehicle of communication. They do not consider it an object to be dissected, nor a toy to be played with. Informants have trouble slowing down their speech, or breaking it up into shorter chunks. They usually cannot answer any question that focuses on the linguistic form of an utterance, as opposed to its content. I have never heard a Trique make a pun or play on words.
>
> This view has important consequences for literacy. Triques regard any part of a meaningful utterance that is pulled out of context as unnatural and unpronounceable. Thus, syllable charts were intensely disliked and virtually impossible to teach, as were word drills that used verbs and adjectives in isolation. People constantly looked for meaning where there was none. My original syllable approach had to be abandoned in favor of an approach that stresses meaningful material in context (Hollenbach 1979:7).

In spite of the lack of documentation, it may be worthwhile to note that various individuals and organizations who are attempting to do literacy work among the Australian Aboriginal groups, have found that the best methods are those which build on a holistic view.

For the past few years, there has been debate in some circles as to whether or not the psycholinguistic view of the reading process is actually appropriate for beginning readers (cf., Whaley and Kibby 1981). It would seem that evidence from reading theory as well as other disciplines definitely points towards the usefulness of a holistic approach even during the beginning stages of reading acquisition—at least in those cultures which are holistic in their world view. In such a situation where one must begin by focusing on the whole, the use of predictable books is one of the most advantageous ways of introducing the concept of reading to preliterate people.

3. Predictable books in other languages and cultures

We turn now to some samples of the way predictable books have been used in other languages and cultures. These are presented in the hope that they may be but the seed of more creative applications.

3.A. Vietnam

In English-speaking situations, the predictable book which is probably the most well-known is *The bus ride,* published by Scott, Foresman, and Company (1971). The text is extremely predictable (and delightful):

A girl got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A boy got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A fox got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A hippopotamus got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A goat got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A rhinoceros got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A fish got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A horse got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A rabbit got on the bus. Then the bus went fast.

A bee got on the bus. Then! (Everyone got off the bus.) Then they all ran fast.

Doris Graham, in a December 1982 unpublished paper, experimented with an adaptation of *The bus ride* for speakers of the Roglai language of Vietnam. In her version, various animals climbed into a huge tree, then a snake climbed the tree and all the other animals jumped down and ran away. It should be noted that this is not a translation of the book, but merely an adaptation of the idea.

3.B. Philippines

One of the favorite books of the Northern Kankanay people residing in the village of Bogang, Mountain Province, was the story of *The duck that ran away from home* (data from personal experience). It is possible that this story might be considered a fable, in that it tells of a duck who got tired of swimming in his little pond day after day. One day he decided to go off to see the world. On his way, he met three other small creatures each of whom was invited to join him (each cycle used identical language). The four finally reached the ocean only to discover that it was unpleasantly salty, and then a huge wave thoroughly drenched them. They climbed up on a rock and decided that, "We've seen the land and we've seen the sea, and home in Bogang is the only place to be!" Even though this story was translated from English and, thus, could have been quite difficult for the Northern Kankanay people to comprehend, yet the predictability of the story line helped them to enjoy it. It also seemed to speak to them culturally, in that the audience that enjoyed it the most was comprised of the old village leaders who were quite concerned that all the young men were going off to seek their fortune in the "outside world." This underlines Bettelheim's view that such stories help to pass cultural values on to the next generation.

3.C. Bolivia

Marion Heaslip (personal correspondence) has done literacy work for a number of years among the Aymara-speaking people of Bolivia. Most of the classes have been in a church context and most of the students have been motivated to learn to read because of their involvement with the church. In April 1981, Heaslip decided to develop a primer based on the words of familiar hymns which the members of

the literacy classes had already memorized. The primer was later published and has proven to be quite successful.

3.D. Peru

Patricia Davis (1981) used a local folklore story as the basis of the set of primers she constructed to teach reading to Machiguenga speakers. The concept of reading was foreign to the Machiguenga. This was complicated by the fact that, as is also true for North American Indian groups, verbs are more predominant than nouns and the verbs carry a great deal of affixation, for example, *irapusatinkaatsempokitasanoigavetpaakemparorokarityo,* meaning 'probably-they-will-turn-right-over-into-the-water-when-they-arrive-but-they-won't-stay-that-way' (1981:272). The average length of Machiguenga verbs is 12 to 18 letters, but verbs with 25 to 35 letters are common.

In order to simplify the reading task, a folklore story was chosen for the primers. This was because of its familiar cultural concepts as well as the natural vocabulary. The story was a trickster type myth, with each of the four primers in the series containing one trickster cycle. The simplified plot of the story in the first primer follows:

> There was a man who was walking through the jungle. He heard an armadillo which had climbed up a tree to chop down clusters of fruit, leaving his shell at the foot of the tree. Since this man was a trickster, he thought that it would be funny to smear the shell with a slippery substance. When the armadillo descended and tried to 'dress himself', the shell slipped off   *soáa.* But the man took pity on him, cleaned off the shell, and they became friends (Davis 1981:269).

The second primer covers the next stage of the man's journey.

Before the students began the first primer, the teacher read the whole first cycle of the story to them. Davis recounts how "High interest and motivation were aroused as students looked forward to learning to read the story for themselves" (1981:267). This high motivational value may be the best reason for considering the use of predictable books. It has often been noted that motivation is the most important factor in determining to what extent a literacy program will fail or succeed.

4. Conclusion

For English, predictable books can be recognized as such because of their repetitive pattern (on any level of the linguistic hierarchy from discourse to word level), their familiar concepts, and their good match between text and illustrations (Rhodes 1981). More analysis is needed to determine if for other languages and cultures, there are universal features which make a book predictable.

Kenneth Goodman (1972) describes the predictability of sequential constraints as follows:

Given any single language element, the possibilities of which elements may follow are highly constrained: some may follow, some may not, some may but are unlikely. Given a string of elements, the constraints become much greater. Hence, language is highly predictable; particularly with regard to grammatical structures … (1972:153).

The factors which make a book predictable may include:

1. Repetition of sequence; this may be a repetition of actual words or rhyming words, or it may be a repetition of activities such as found in the typical trickster cycle (Radin 1956)

2. Cumulative sequence, for example, "This is the house that Jack built …"

3. Familiar cultural sequence, for example, "One, two, buckle my shoe …"

4. Chronological sequence, for example, "On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me …"

5. Problem-centered sequence, for example, *The little red hen*

6. Rhyme-rhythm sequence, which should especially be considered in Southeast Asia where rhyme is so important psycholinguistically that some dictionaries have been done based on rhyme instead of the usual alphabetical order.

Several of the above types of sequence can be seen in the first stanza of the poem *Over in the meadow* (Weaver 1980:215):

Over in the meadow

in the sand

in the sun

Lived an old mother turtle and her little turtle one.

Here one sees repetition of the actual words *in the* in the first three lines. There is alliteration in *sand* and *sun,* and rhyme in *sun* and *one.* In terms of cultural expectation, the idea of turtles sunning themselves would be more familiar to a Seminole child in Florida than to a Tlinket in Alaska. Thus, we see prediction working on the level of the reader's schema (that is, expected activities of turtles), as well as on the lower level of the rhyming sounds in *sun* and *one.*

If what Bettelheim says about the need for culturally relevant literature which speaks to deeply felt human predicaments is important to this society with its wealth of environmental print and written literature, how much more important for those societies which see nothing to be gained from reading, or worse, who have learned to read in a language they do not understand and feel reading is nothing more than

pronouncing syllables. As Kenneth Goodman states regarding those who have been taught with a skills emphasis (as in most third world countries):

> In countries with extensive literacy instruction, there are far more people who can read to some extent but don't than there are people who can't read at all. There are even people who read well enough to become highly educated who seldom read anything for their own pleasure. For them, there is no pleasure in reading …. Response to literacy instruction will certainly be proportionate to the value and need …. There will be significant differences in the relative degree to which literacy instruction is accepted (Goodman 1977:312–313).

Since prediction is such a vital part of the reading process, this is a plea that more work be done to find appropriate vehicles in preliterate societies which will encourage the beginning readers to develop the skill of prediction. The use of appropriate predictable materials will enable them to experience the joys of reading which can come only when one is able to move directly from text to meaning.

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