Why might good readers stop reading?

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Why might good readers stop reading? The question was precipitated by a small group of individuals identified during research among the Machiguenga of the southern Peru jungle. Representative of this group is Abel (not his real name), a man of some 34 years of age, who—at the cost of much effort and time—persevered in school as an adult until completing all of his elementary education. Abel’s reading test showed him to be a proficient reader of basic-level material. He also demonstrated good comprehension and recall. However, Abel’s statement to us was that he had not read since his house and books burned some time ago and that he had forgotten how to read. Since other Machiguengas who complete elementary school are almost all avid readers and avid learners, the lack of interest represented by Abel’s small group merits attention.

In a landmark review article of reading theory and practice, Stanovich (1986) cites evidence that reading acquisition itself facilitates phonological awareness (1986:363). Efficient phonological decoding is the key mechanism in comprehension (1986 369, 373). When decoding skills are developed to the point of automaticity, word recognition is achieved by direct, nonmediated visual access which enables the individual to read with speed and ease. This frees more short-term memory capacity from the lower-level processes to concentrate on meaning, vocabulary building, and increasing general knowledge (Stanovich 1986:369–382). Thus, the expectation is that by the time a reader has reached fluency, the task has become both easy and enjoyable and will, therefore, be continued.

Why might readers leave off reading? The following are possible reasons.

1. They never developed full fluency, thus, the effort required to read their school texts and other materials brought them near to frustration level and damaged comprehension (Kletzien 1991:70, 1996). Notes on Literacy, 22(4).
quoting Afflerback and Johnston 1984:314). The experience was, therefore, not pleasant enough for them to wish to continue.

2. Lack of broad exposure to reading may have prevented these students’ development of an awareness of the organization of text. This makes reading more difficult and less enjoyable (Kletzien 1991:79).

3. They may not have learned sufficient reading strategies and when to employ them (1991:79).

4. They may have failed to have enough reading successes, compared to peers or by their own standards, to have developed positive affect for reading. This is a crucial ingredient in continuance (1991:80). Paris, Lipson, and Wixson (1983) distinguish between the skill and the will to use known strategies to reach reading goals.

5. Material sufficiently interesting to stimulate continued reading may have been lacking. Gudschinsky states, “There must be enough material … so that he [the reader] can find pleasure in reading while the next stage comes around” (Gudschinsky 1973:10). Several of those interviewed supported this possibility with statements such as, “There is nothing to read.” “How am I going to get money to buy books?”

6. The milieu may have discouraged rather than encouraged reading. Gillette and Ryan make the point, “Mass illiteracy generates its own justification and logic. Nobody can read, hence communication is by oral rather than by written means. That being so, the illiterate is in no way marginal—he is on centre stage—and consequently has no reason to learn to read” (Gillette and Ryan 1983:24). Although Machiguenga communities, in general, now make extensive use of literacy, the individuals who had left off reading belonged, in the main, to families with a high illiteracy rate. In their circle, communication is undoubtedly oral rather than written.

7. Little practical use may have been found for reading. Mikulecky (1990:28) cites Heath (1980) who lists the purposes of literacy as instrumental, social interactional, news related, memory supportive, substitution for oral messages, provision of permanent record, and confirmation. Mikulecky (1990:28) also cites a study by Mikulecky, Shanklin, and Caverly which identified the following adult purposes for reading:
   a. To keep up with what is going on
   b. For relaxation and personal enjoyment
   c. To find out how to get something done
   d. To study for personal and occupational advancement
   e. To discuss with friends what has been read

In a society where books and paper are scarce, newspapers nonexistent, and pamphlets and letters rare, individuals may never have developed personal habits which sustain reading.

9. The professed nonreaders may have been understating—this possibility would be in keeping with the Machiguenga sense of modesty. Likely, they have not stopped reading entirely but, rather, they read (1996). Notes on Literacy, 22(4).
seldom. They do not count their occasional perusal of their children’s school texts and notebooks, reading of signs, or other sporadic literacy events as “reading.”

10. A combination of the above times may have curtailed reading.

In conclusion, what lessons can be drawn? The individuals that were interviewed felt their reading skills had deteriorated for lack of practice; thus, we learn that even good reading ability can grow rusty. To help, we can do the following.

- Teach reading strategies appropriate for different types of material. These strategies may include scanning, noting titles and subtitles, and also checking the first lines of paragraphs or the conclusion to glean the main idea, then rereading for details.

- Provide instruction concerning the organization of texts. For example, poetry, narrative, exhortative, fables, descriptive, riddles, and procedural texts are all organized differently, and readers can learn what to expect from each.

**A continuing supply of interesting, cheap material, however, may be the crucial element to keep good readers practicing and skills sharp.** Local news sheets, informative bulletins, or study sheets may be a partial answer. As literacy projects are terminated, one must seek to assure a long-term flow of locally-authored material for the readers who have toiled so hard to achieve good reading skills.

**References**


Citations


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