

Jumbled Words

When we teach an adult how to read, it is natural to focus on words. That is, we show them parts of a word (syllables) and teach him/her how to sound out a word, sometimes letter by letter. Because of the emphasis on reading words, the student tends to read slowly with little phrasing or fluency. Sometimes it helps to think about our own reading, how we learned in the first place, and what our own reading looks like now.

Most of us were taught to read through phonics (the transfer of letters to sounds) and we began to gather a core of known words that grew and grew as time went by. As we read now, we know so many words that it is seldom necessary to break a word down phonetically. Our brains are working so fast when we are processing text that we are not looking at every letter. Do we need to see every letter or letters in the proper sequence in order to read for meaning?

A recent report in the Science and Nature section of The Epoch Times (June 19-25, 2009) addresses the issue of reading words letter by letter. Leonardo Vintini uses this example: We culod sracbmle the wrods in wtehaver form we wsih. His example shows that the sentence can be easily understood because the first and last letters are in their proper places: We could scramble the words in whatever form we wish. Mr. Vintini goes on to say, “Our ability to comprehend the jumbled example above shows that our minds perceive words as a whole and not just letter by letter.”

One of my students (whom I will call for this article Susan) recently read “almost” for “also”. Susan’s substitution started the same as “also” and both words made sense in the sentence (His father was also a farmer.). Yet Susan reread the sentence and corrected herself. Susan said afterwards, “I sometimes am not looking at the ends of words.” Susan was reading for meaning, checking in her mind what makes sense and sounds right, and at the moment of self correction, she was also quickly checking the visual ending of a word. Susan is close to having a system in place, so that she will grow as a reader every time she picks up something to read. She is doing what we all do naturally: integrating all sources of information (meaning, structural, visual).

In a different lesson, Susan substituted sung for sang (He sang on the streets for tips.). In this case the beginnings and endings of both words were the same. She was using meaning as both words bring understanding. In this case, Susan neglected the structure of our language. That is, sung without a helping word doesn’t sound quite right.

I think it helps to think about our own reading as we explore the world of literacy with our students. Explain how you go about your reading and what helps you the most. I will close with another quote by Leonardo Vintini, “ We are taught to read through phonics—using sounds of the alphabet to comprehend unknown words. Later, we begin to rely less and less on this

phonemic system for word generation as our growing vocabulary is gradually committed to memory.”

Works Cited:

1. Vintini, Leonardo. The Epoch Times. June 19-25, 2009

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