

Teaching the Word “Restaurant”: A Deweyan View

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Part I

Some time ago I was working with a group of adults who were reading at an intermediate level as determined by our program in our Basic Literacy program. In terms of the CASAS, their scores ranged in the low 200s. In terms of the LVA created READ, they scored on the C-D range on an A-F scale. This group was able to read short narratives of 2-3 pages in a given two-hour session.

One story that they read was titled **Good-Bye Television** that includes the following paragraph:

"I looked at my family. They were sitting quietly in front of the television set watching a football game. No one was talking. 'That is the way we act every night and every weekend!' [the mother] thought. 'We are in the same room, but we are never really together. I have to do something about this right now.'"

The mother then shut the TV off, the family began to talk. Certain problems arose. The family began working on the problems and set a one-hour rule per day for the TV.

It was an interesting lesson and raised a lot of discussion. We worked hard both on proficiently reading the text and probing the content.

With this group, I may preview some words in advance. We'll read through the narrative. I'll note words with which they're having difficulty. I give time for students to sound them out. I try to hold back other students who want to jump in. We work through and continue probing the content of the narrative all the way through the lesson. At the end, I'll jot down the words on the white board that they had trouble with. We work on them by (a) sounding them out, (b) breaking them into syllables, (c) or (d) through sight word memorization. Then I'll do some drill activities with the words.

Here's a question. In one of our stories the word "restaurant" came up. I wrote the word on the board. We began to sound it out. They got "rest," and were working on the sounds in the last two syllables. They just couldn't put the word together. I spent a few moments working through the word, depending only on phonemic awareness clues, as I thought it was important for them to master that word in that way. I eventually gave up. I told the students, "it is a place where you can get something to eat." They got "restaurant" immediately. In formal terms, I activated the schema that provided the context where they were able to perceive the word in a flash. The work we did on the word helped to "prime the pump," which resulted in the students "earning" the word once the appropriate schema was activated.

The broader question then is the relationships between top-down (whole language) and bottom-up (skill-based) processes. A mastery of the sound-sight relationship between the spoken and written word is an essential. The critical question is how this competency can be achieved.

In this case, what happened? I can't say for sure, but this is how I see it:

- (a) In context, they would have usually, but not always gotten that word. It would depend, in part, in how they were interacting with the context.
- (b) When I had isolated the word on the board, they had a block that wouldn't allow them to put the sounds together into a coherent whole, even though they accurately pronounced most of the individual sounds.
- (c) After getting the word via the context clue, they were able to look at the sound and letter combinations and thereby make a connection with the informal phonemic exercise we had undertaken. That is, they were then able to work backward from the word to an analysis of the individual sounds.

This group of students benefits by consistent work on phonemic awareness, that much is clear. What is not so clear is the extent to which they would benefit from a systematic approach to phonics. They derive a great deal of value from the content of the materials we study, including that, which on occasion they create themselves. At the same time they need persistent work on a broad array of basic skills, which we incorporate into our regular program. That includes consistent phonics work, which is not synonymous with a systematic phonics approach.

Consequently, I emphasize the importance of a balanced or integrated approach, as advocated by P. David Pearson, Michael Pressley, and Victoria Purcell-Gates. This opens space for a variety of approaches within a given range that respects students' needs for both content-driven and skills-based methodologies and materials.

Part II

After giving up on having the group identify the word "restaurant" through phonemic strategies, I did not simply give them the word. I did give them a very strong prompt. With "restaurant" on the board and after their struggling engagement with the various sound combination of the last two syllables, I said, "It's a place to eat." The difference between simply giving them the word and providing a very powerful clue is minor, but significant. The significance being that it still required an *inference* on the part of the students and that is all the difference in the world. That is because an inference still requires thinking, even as in this case, the thought process was instantaneous.

In Vygotsky's terms I increased the scaffold support, as the earlier experiment in

phonemic skill identification was not working in this case. If my goal for the lesson was simply teaching words, I could have attempted to add clues that might have helped them further in connecting the sounds to the words. For example, since they knew "rest," I could have then proceeded to have them sound out "ant," which they might have pronounced like the insect. With that prompt, I could have played off the rhythms of the syllables. That is, with "rest" on the board, they and I together could have stressed the sounds in the rest of the word. Thus, for the next syllable I could have said something like "bomp," just to get the flow of the word going in their lived experience. Then with "ant" pronounced at the end, I could have continued playing with the word rhythmically, having them engage the flow of the word with "bomp" as the second syllable. Thus, "rest"/"bomp"/"ant", having them say that several times under the assumption that they would have made an imaginative connection that might have finally clicked.

Note that that would not have been a phonemic approach strictly speaking as I would have been relying on context clues beyond the innate logic of what was embedded in the sound combinations, especially of the second syllable. The linkage would have been with their own innate sense of the flow of oral language that, conceivably, could have served as a cueing mechanism grafted on not only to the middle phoneme, but in seeing the word whole in their minds. That is, it still would have required an inference beyond the literal sounds, in which the sounds would have tapped into certain symbols in their own processing, leading into the integrated whole.

I could have taken that approach, though I did not because my focus was not the teaching of isolated words and sounds. It was, rather, the content of the narrative that we had read, even as *one* of my objectives was to have the students notice and work with words with which they had difficulty. That is, as intermediate levels readers, they had a basic phonemic grasp of print language, but still needed considerable practice in a variety of skills and aptitudes in becoming increasingly fluent, including the interpretive capacity to sift texts for multiple meanings. In this I work with a model based on *literacy* that obviously includes reading as a major component, but isn't defined exclusively by it. On that, I share close affinities with the EFF project, to say nothing of the Freirian quest to read the word in order to read the world as well as with Sticht's functional-context theory of literacy. Thus, in this case, I drew on a meaning context clue. With that clincher, the students then gained the insight to look at those letter and syllable combinations with fresh eyes and perceive (even if only in a flash) how the sounds in the word "restaurant" came together. A retrospective approach is also a valuable source of learning.

Either way, whether I continued with the phonemic vein, or gave them a context clue, the critical factor remains the same. That is, the importance of stimulating thinking throughout the learning process, whether of sounds in words, whole words by sight or of the content of what is read. Perhaps this is where syntax and meaning come together, in the mediation of thinking through active learning as a symbol-making process of making sense, whatever the specific learning task may be focused on.

There are other places to go to further draw this out. However I turn to Chapter 11 of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, written close to a century ago. The chapter is

titled "Experience and Thinking." How apropos to the anecdote! How apropos to all that is best in adult literacy education! For Dewey it is not experience, per se that is important, but the *enhancement* of experience through critical reflection and disciplined activity in the process of progressively resolving a problematic situation. Experience, Dewey tells us, involves "trying." That trying is an essential part of an experiment within a problematic situation in quest of resources and direction that lead to its resolution. While the trying is the effort, the "undergoing" is what happens as a result. We make progress, we get stymied, or we remain in a doubtful situation. But, in any event, the trying and the undergoing *together*, changes experience. Thus, for us, the nature of the word identification exercise changed in the process of experimenting with it. It is not simply the trying, then, but the undergoing, too, which stimulates the critical reflection on a problem in the midst of a quest on route toward resolution. The problem is progressively worked on through ever deepening thinking and continued experimentation. Hypotheses emerge that require additional experimentation—additional trying and undergoing as one works toward what Dewey phrases as the "ends-in-view."

In the lesson at hand, I started out with a tentative hypothesis that it was within the students' capacity structure to identify the word "restaurant" exclusively through phonemic prompts. Note, my experience and theirs did not prove that that was false. However, it did disclose certain problems that were not easily resolvable simply through isolating sounds of syllables even if the individual sounds of the syllable unit were correct. (They still had difficulty with that second syllable.) They had most of the parts to the word (though I speculate here that they did not fully possess that knowledge of the sound letter combinations). Yet, they couldn't put the sounds together into the integrated whole of the word. An element was still missing. What was that? In part it was limited phonemic dexterity (even of what they knew) at a high level of internalization. Perhaps as fundamentally, they lacked dexterity with the syntax and grammar of print literacy. Of course, they knew the word "restaurant," that's not the point. Yet they were limited in their capacity to play with written language in the use of a broad range of logic to figure things out. (Note, I am only speaking here only of written language). I don't know this, of course, but that's a working hypothesis that would still require confirmation in the ongoing process of critical engagement with this group of learners.

The key stimulus in my view, is what Dewey refers to as "vital learning" whatever that may be in specific terms. It was with that stimulus that students are most likely to fully use their "judgment: to hunt for the connections of the thing dealt with" (p. 144). In my own limited way, this vital learning is what I seek to stimulate within students, whatever specific content areas or methodologies that I may utilize. The word "restaurant" was a very small part of our lesson that day. The word in itself was unimportant. What was critical was the extent to which the lesson as a whole was permeated by vital learning, tapping into and expanding the meaning-making symbolic discourse system of the students in the context of their group interaction. It is that which turns "an experience" into an experience of learning worth having.

Pushing forward in such a learning/teaching climate, the teacher works in a thoughtfully experimental way, testing and thinking in the search for those connections that move

learning forward, ideally, in each particular instance, all the way through the process. Both students and teacher together remain engaged in such an experiment of learning as long as the process of learning and teaching is going on. “The object of [such mutual] thinking is to help reach a conclusion,” that of a satisfactory learning outcome as defined by the participants. “Since the situation in which thinking occurs is a doubtful one, thinking is a process of inquiry, of looking into things, of investigating.” As Dewey continues to explain it, “It is seeking, a quest, for something that is not at hand.” In this, [a]ll thinking is research, and all research is native, original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of what he is looking for” (p. 148). Thinking in this case was figuring out the meaning of “restaurant” by whatever means best suited the purpose—the purpose at hand in this particular learning situation.

That situation was a creative striving for investigative learning (i.e., research) propelled by the stimulus of “vital experience” that I sought to stimulate through the reading selection I chose for the day. The many ways that we interacted with the text in pushing learning forward all the way through it were linked to that broader effort. The word “rest-aur-ant” was a microcosmic element of that situation.

Reference

Dewey. J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. New York: Free Press.