

Reading Difficulties of College Freshmen

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During the fall term at Southern Illinois State Normal University, the freshmen advisers and members of the department of education cooperated in a study of the causes of freshman failure. Diagnostic treatment took several forms, including mental ratings through the use of mental tests, the discovery of personality traits, environmental conditions, the economic situation of the student, the determination of individual effort, aptitudes, and general reading ability. This paper will attempt to present the findings of the reading ability survey.

As a first step in the program, the Iowa Silent Reading Tests, Advanced, were administered to a group of 104 freshmen who stood in the lower deciles of achievement according to marks given in the fall quarter. The results of the tests were shown in Table I.

TABLE I

Test	Test norm.	Class median	No. pupils who equalled or exceeded the norm.	Grade rating of pupils below norm.				
				12	11	10	9	below 9th
Test 1..... Paragraph meaning	36	26	23	8	17	6	10	40
Test 2..... Word recognition (vocabulary)	47	38	7	19	26	26	10	16
Test 3..... Paragraph organization	12	7	7	14	13	12	11	49
Test 4..... Sentence meaning	30	29	18	18	5	14	7	11
Test 5..... Locating information	20	19	40	29	10	12	8	3
Test 6..... Rate	31	27	39	2	3	18	19	26

A study of the table reveals the following facts:

1. Most students were low in paragraph reading ability, and very low in organization.
2. Almost half the students knew how to locate information reasonably well.
3. The group was very low in word recognition ability.
4. The rate curve was markedly bi-modal, students tending on the one hand to be moderately rapid to very rapid, or to be very slow, with only a small sprinkling midway between.
5. Sentence reading ability was almost normal, so far as the group was concerned. However, it must be noted that considerable numbers would profit by increased training in this respect.

It was found that a definite positive correlation existed between reading ability and marks in content subjects, as would be expected. A much lower positive correlation existed between reading ability and other subjects, as mathematics, while dependent upon reading ability, draw also upon other major skills.

At this same institution, a college remedial reading class has been set up for those students who desire to improve their reading skills. The class meets once each week, and attempts to assist students to initiate a self help program. Each week attention is called to some new phase of reading, and suggestions are given which assist the student in his attempt to acquire each set of skills. Thus far we have deemed it advisable to stress the following.

1. More voluntary recreational reading. At each meeting several short stories likely to be highly interesting to students are called to their attention. Considerable additional reading is resulting, and students are becoming acquainted with sources heretofore unknown to them.

2. The only request which is made of students other than the suggestion to enjoy the story is that they keep a sharp look-out for new words, and that they attempt to master and use such words in their own writing and speaking.

3. Aside from increasing rate and vocabulary, it is felt that many desirable reading habits and general attitudes are being formed as students of low reading ability engage in such recreational reading.

4. Reading by phrases or thought units.

5. Automatic selection from a sentence or a phrase of those "key" words which are high in meaning content.

6. General comprehension, and skill in dealing with the various types of paragraph material.

7. Skill in the use of the table of contents, the index, etc., in finding information.

8. Skill in organizing the content of reading as a means to thorough learning and better written or oral expression.

It is probable that from kindergarten to college more stress must be placed upon dealing with ideas. The kindergarten child who repeats a story is receiving practice in dealing with sequential thought. Story telling on this level will therefore develop organization skills which will function after the student begins to depend upon the printed page for ideas. All through the pupil's school career, more emphasis must be placed upon the ability to organize.

After the basic reading skills have been formed in the first three or four years of the pupil's school experience, it is probable that there should be little or no formal instruction in reading as a subject course, and much instruction of a more informal nature, utilizing the content matter of regular subjects. This will help to give to reading instruction more vitalized subject matter which has been somewhat lacking hitherto.

The idea of extending reading subject matter to all the subject fields of the school should be carried further into the area of voluntary reading. Many teachers are multiplying many fold the amount of so-called supplementary reading material by encouraging pupils to read newspapers, periodicals and other materials, thus stimulating students to find material intrinsically interesting and forming reading habits and attitudes likely to persist.

Under such a plan of development reading becomes to the child, not another subject with which he must deal but a means to an end—in school and out—a means of acquiring information, and a means of securing wholesome, interesting recreation.