REVERSING THE TREND

Margaret J. Early

Last fall, the advisory panel which had been charged by the College Entrance Examination Board with examining and explaining the steady decline of SAT scores from 1963 to 1977 issued its report. It declared the decline to be a real one and laid out two sets of factors which appear to have contributed to the lowering of SAT mean scores (Wirtz, 1977). The first set of factors, more influential in the years before 1970 than after, was related to the expanding population aspiring to college entrance. The second set of factors, interacting with the first (and with each other), included changes in the curriculum (such as the adding of many elective courses), "diminished seriousness of purpose and attention to the mastery of skills and knowledge," the impact of television, the changing role of the family, political and social turmoil, and lowered motivation. Not surprisingly, the press seized upon statements that seemed to fault the schools, and within the profession and among the public, reactions have varied from outrage to smug it told you so's.

What is the appropriate reaction of teachers and researchers in the field of reading? I hope we will waste no time in debating the validity of either the SAT tests or the panel's reasonable explanations and speculations. Instead, we should take seriously the panel's charge that "less thoughtful and critical reading is now being demanded and done in high school and that careful writing has apparently about gone out of style" (Wirtz, 1977, p. 27). This report adds one more reason for looking carefully at what we know now about the process of comprehending, and at what we still have to learn, and for asking whether our current teaching practices support, or undermine, our theories and research.

Before going on, I should say that the SAT report can only be distorted by a one-paragraph summary and by wrenching quotations out of context, as I have done. For example, although the high school is singled out in the foregoing quotation, the panel is well aware that the verbal skills tested by SAT in the eleventh- and twelfth-grade have been developing from infancy and are shaped as much by parents and primary teachers as by television and adolescent peer groups. I don't mean to suggest that the ways we teach reading are accountable for arrested development in comprehension, or that the pruning away of bad practices will in itself reverse the declining verbal scores. But teachers and schools do make a measurable difference in students' achievement; so we have need to re-examine our practices, not just in high school, but all along the way.

What We've Been Doing

The years of the SAT decline (1963 to 1977) have witnessed extraordinary activity in research, publishing, development of instructional systems for reading, education of reading teachers, and growth of professional organizations, like the International Reading Association. But the great weight of this activity has leaned toward the improvement of beginning reading whether for normally progressing primary pupils or for older students beginning again. One effect has been a spate of basal reading series — still the most widely-used approach to beginning reading — which have placed heavy emphasis on decoding skills, or phonics. Whether or not this code-emphasis has weakened beginning readers' attention to meaning is debatable, especially since the effects tend not to appear until after the primary grades. Most school testing programs show that beginning readers in this decade are reading earlier and better than their counterparts in the 50s and 60s. It is after grade three that local, state and national assessments record a slump.

Although many reading specialists question the accuracy and import of these assessments, my reading of the reports, my experiences in New York State schools, and my encounters with teachers throughout the country lead me to believe, with the SAT panel, that students beyond the primary grades are not reading as carefully, as critically, or as widely as their learning abilities, their enthusiasm and quality instruction would permit. I doubt that we are witnessing a decline in reading comprehension so much as an awareness of untapped potential. That is, now that we have many more successful primary readers we are becoming aware of how many of them do not develop into students who can use reading as a powerful means of learning. Alvin Toffler, in Future Shock, makes a similar point; he says the illiterates of tomorrow will be able to read (in the limited sense of decoding) but they will be unable to reason.

I believe that a very powerful reason why students do not develop habits of thoughtful and critical reading is that teachers in the upper grades (with infrequent exceptions,
SAT's lower in 1975 than in 1962, 1955 and 1947, but sustained around fewer materials so that the teacher can single words. This study found the readability levels of the discussions, giving explanations, asking good questions asked mostly for underlining, circling and filling-in of compared the readability levels of SAT's with samples of textbooks most widely used during the elementary and high school years of the test-takers. The authors found that assignments in reading, history and literature texts asked mostly for underlining, circling and filling-in of single words. This study found the readability levels of the SAT's lower in 1975 than in 1962, 1955 and 1947, but reported signs of "increasing challenge in the textbooks, particularly at the elementary level." However, the SAT samples proved to be more difficult than 11th-grade textbooks in history, literature, grammar and composition, which had average readability levels of grades 9-10.

This study of the difficulty of current textbooks reflects some of the confusions which beset teachers in the upper grades. Faced with texts of uneven difficulties and with students of uneven abilities and mixed motivations, they are tempted to abandon textbooks altogether, replacing them with lectures, demonstrations, "handouts," dittoed exercises, audiovisual presentations, "hands-on" experiences, and "bull sessions." Thus, teachers escape the responsibility for directing analytic and critical reading, and students fail to learn.

Many gifted teachers use television as a stimulus to reading and writing, but even so, we must concede the SAT panel's point that extensive viewing cuts down the amount of time students devote to learning through reading. This generation's preference for sound and image is shared by their teachers and inevitably lessens their attention to study-type reading. Geared to channel-switching, young people tend to prefer their reading in bite-size morsels, too. Understandably, teachers succumb to the desire for entertainment and avoid lessons in which they must direct unwilling students to interpret and examine, as well as absorb, ideas.

In reviewing some of the forces that work against the maturing of abilities to comprehend, I don't mean to imply that we can do without discovery methods, diagnostic-prescriptive approaches, individualized reading, the nonprint media, or even the judicious use of self-correcting skills exercises. I do mean that we must vary our teaching patterns and find time in our schedules for the direct teaching of how to understand ideas through print, as well as how to express ideas in writing.

What We Know About Comprehension

Although there is much we still have to learn about the process of comprehension, we could reverse the trend of declining comprehension scores if we applied what we now know. For example, we know that:

**Comprehension depends on what readers bring to the text.** Or, as Henry David Thoreau put it: "We can learn only that which we half know already." Both these statements are echoed by Bloom (1976) when he proposes that the students' cognitive entry behaviors, enthusiasm for learning and quality of instruction are what determine the amount and kind of learning. The implications of teaching are clear. Thoughtful and critical reading can be developed only on a broad base of previous reading experiences. So schemes to stimulate wide reading, such as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), are prerequisites to improving comprehension. So is reading aloud to children.
since that is one of the warmest invitations to read on your own.

What students bring to a new text depends upon what they remember from previous reading. The implications here are many. One is that we should provide content worth remembering. Another is that we teach students ways to aid their memory: note-taking, outlining, summarizing, reacting orally or in writing to something they have read. A third implication is that teachers must help students to recall what they already know about a given topic — and then show them how to stimulate recall themselves through surveying a text before reading it.

Both comprehension and retention are enhanced by perceiving the author’s organization. This means that teachers must frequently help students, before they read, to map the text, noting topics and sub-topics and other clues to organizational patterns such as cause-effect and comparison/contrast.

Comprehension depends upon the reader’s intent or purpose. Especially with study-type materials, the teacher helps to focus attention by setting specific purposes at first and gradually inducing students to set their own.

Comprehension is the result of basic operations of thinking and feeling, such as classifying, generalizing, sequencing, hypothesizing, problem-solving, translating, analyzing and valuing. All content teachers expect students to use these processes, but the best teachers show them how.

Comprehension is related to versatility of reading rate. As early as the intermediate grades, students should have directed practice in how to skim for ideas relevant to their purpose, how to scan when their purpose is not yet in focus, how to determine which materials should be read rapidly and which should be read closely.

What We Will Do to Reverse the Trend

These six reminders by no means exhaust our present understanding of how comprehension develops, but if teachers in the upper grades were to act upon just these six they would have to revise and add to their present teaching practices. They would stimulate wide reading, providing books and time for reading in class, exhibiting their own enthusiasms by frequently reading aloud; they would introduce reading assignments by flushing out students’ stored-up knowledge of the topic at hand; they would set purposes; they would guide students’ search for the author’s organizational patterns; they would ask questions which require students to hypothesize, classify, generalize, and analyze; they would encourage students to experiment with varying rates of reading; and they would require students to make their understanding as explicit as possible by writing — summarizing and paraphrasing the writer’s ideas, interpreting them, and reacting to them.

All these practices take time both in preparation and presentation. They can rarely be developed around the same material for every student in a class. Suppose we ask for 60 minutes a week of thoughtful reading and careful writing — for every student — adjusted as closely as possible to each one’s abilities. For some high school teachers, that might mean the preparation of one such lesson a week for each class; for other teachers, with more diverse groups, it might mean several lessons at different levels delivered in two or three shorter time periods.

It is asking a great deal; but not more than concerned teachers are willing to give when they are convinced that these practices will help to reverse the trend of declining scholarship among our ablest students.

Footnote

These three variables paraphrase Bloom’s in the reference given below.

References


Margaret J. Early is Professor of Education and Associate Dean of the School of Education at Syracuse University. She began her teaching career in the public schools of Connecticut and Massachusetts, and completed her studies for a Doctorate in Education at Boston University, where she was the Warren Research Fellow in English. Dr. Early is author of many articles and monographs on the teaching of reading.