

Reading the Headlines

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It is easy for educators to tell teachers what to do, far removed from the trials of the classroom. This is why I do Reading with a class of Form 1 Specials, a mixed class of normal-looking 14-year-olds. After all, who is better placed than I to put my money where my mouth is to demystify reading. For we have to stop treating reading as a problem. We have to let children know that reading is not something that is only done in literature class. In a visual-aural age of secondary orality, where news comes predominantly through the TV, reading must yet be as familiar as eating or breathing.

That was my motive one Thursday when I went out and bought nineteen copies of a newspaper, one for each of my students to read and to keep. Gone are the days when that was the first thing that the boy of every ordinary house, no matter how poor, had to do: “Go down the road and buy a papers.” As I looked at them fondling their gift, I wanted to tell them that when I was growing up, a ‘fold-up’ *Evening News* used to be where their rag is—hanging out of the back-pocket.

It is with these concepts in mind—both affective and cognitive—termed ‘reading from authentic materials’, that I began: “What the headlines say?”

Silence. Unable to decode, they just gazed. And just when I was about to prompt, a voice said “Teens . . .” Another voice said, “stole . . .” More eyes were becoming interested in the words in large yellow print. “V----.” And then a chorus of boys who had read further on shouted, “Guns,” followed by a lone male who said, “ammunition.” An argument ensued that the papers said “ammo,” not “ammunition.” Thrilled more by the discovery of their capacity for word association and use of context clues, I drew their attention to the word beginning with “V” that still remained a puzzle. But no prodding between graphophonic cues and the picture could raise the word “vault,” so I had to tell, whereupon I was corrected: Miss, is not ‘vault.’ Is ‘volt.’

We read all the front page headlines, the enticement being that they would choose the article that promised to be the most interesting as that morning’s reading. Needless to say, “Teens Steal Vault” won out. And as THEY read without much help, pursuing this preposterous act perpetrated by their peers, we paused periodically, in good Trini *mauvais langue* to predict, to make inferences, to check comprehension, to correct comprehension—as Reading Instruction towards successful literacy advises.

The unfolding of the article was by no means easy, but it was done with interest by a bunch of usually phlegmatic youth. Accusations of encouraging children into crime by glorifying it don’t bother me; for the evils of crime are better taught through opportunities to point out those evils.

From this episode, though, I learned that in turning old-fashioned attitudes to reading on their head, one cannot take anything for granted. For when we got to the end of the first column, fingers tracing words were still going down the page. The fingers only stopped

when, with sense, intrigue vanished. Yes, they had gone down past the bold headline below into the other article. My children didn't know that when one came to the end of a column, one had to go back up to the top of the page. I almost wept! Not only teachers, but our entire society must bear the responsibility when fourteen-year-olds can't navigate the layout of a newspaper page.

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