"JUST GRANDMA AND ME" IN THE YEAR ONE CLASSES

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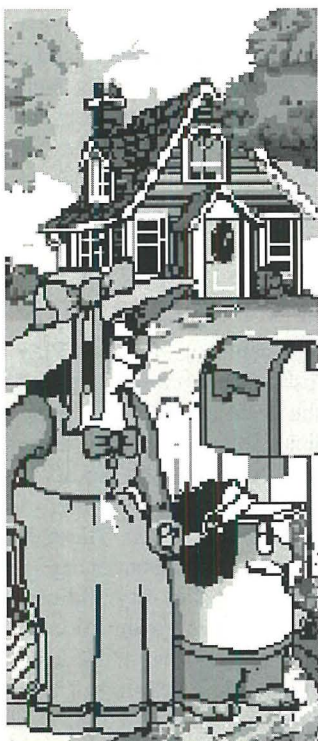
One of the pages of Just Grandma & Me

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Reading Software

Most reading software nowadays follows the 'Living Books' approach rendered popular by the Brøderbund software series, with the following typical elements. The story is presented in short paragraphs, each paragraph appears in one page (screen) accompanied by a detailed illustration. As soon as the page appears, the paragraph is read through by the narrator, with the words highlighted in the process. Clicking on an object at the start of the sentence enables the child to listen to the reading more than once. Very often there is also the option of switching from one language to another. This is only part of the story. The characters in the picture are animated and the rest is 'acted out' before the next page is displayed.

Usually there are two versions of the story: 'Read To Me' and 'Let Me Play'. 'Read To Me' goes through the whole story, in which case the children will just have to sit back, watch and listen.

In 'Let Me Play' the children will have a more active part, as they will be able to go back and forward through the pages. In this mode, most of the background objects in the page can be activated by clicking on them. This will activate an event which has nothing to do with the story itself, but which is usually quite entertaining. Given the chance, the children will spend hours exploring by clicking on every minute object in each picture.

Application: Different Ways of Using Reading Software

One of the Brøderbund titles listed above is currently in use in the Year 1 classes in state schools. *Just Grandma and Me* has a very simple storyline, but the theme, basically a day at the beach, is directly relevant to the children's everyday experience, presenting through text, pictures and animation objects and situations which can easily make part of a simple *conversation*. This is important as we should use the software as a vehicle towards *spoken* as much as written English. The point is that although this is supposed to be *reading* software, we are here dealing with other skills than just reading: listening, and self-expression.

The pages contain little text, just like in any other traditional reading book addressed to this age range. However the opportunities for striking lively conversations are enormous, especially because of the sound, speech and animation presented. The teacher's main aim when using this kind of software, therefore, should be that of monopolizing *all* the possible options on offer. The two main methods of going about it are:

Know the software inside out. Try to discover all the possible hidden elements in every page in the 'Let Me Play' mode. Relate these to particular curriculum objectives and use only a couple of these in every session. Even the two cartoon sequences in the Credits section can offer some fun and room for discussion!

Let the children *discover* the story (and all those entertaining hidden elements) for themselves, monitor their reactions and observe their comments. Something they say may just as well be a good starting point for a particular topic. The 'Read To Me' section can be opted for later on.

Suggested Activities

Discussing Events in "Let Me Play" Mode Observe their comments while seeing the events. Observe which event they will click on the most. Some events will certainly interest them more than others, and they will continually click over them to watch them over and over again. The older classes may be asked to write sentences or paragraphs about these events, but for children in Year One, simply asking them questions to help them use their imagination and encourage self expression should be enough. Taking the first page of the software *Just Grandma*

And Me, for instance (Fig. 1): upon a particular click by the user, a bee alights on the character (introduced as Little Critter) and eventually flies off the screen. Little Critter's reaction is that of fright. Questions at this point may be: *Where do you think has the bee gone? Are you afraid of bees? Why do you think was Little Critter afraid of it?*

Discussing the Story

This may not necessarily be conducted after the children have gone through *all* of the program. Rather, try to stimulate their imagination by asking them to try and continue the story before they actually turn the page. Example, on page one Little Critter and his Grandma are waiting for the bus. *What happens when the Next Page arrow is clicked?*

Discussing the Characters

Encourage them to give comments about the characters, the way they move, the way they speak. *What is special about Little Critter? Do you like Grandma? How are they dressed?*

Word Recognition

The narrator reads the paragraph through as soon as a new page is displayed. Although the words are highlighted along the narration, this may be too fast for the children to follow, especially in the early months. Word recognition may be achieved through another method. In this software, every word can be clicked individually, and the computer reads it back. Concentrate on a few key words only, from a selection of pages at a time.

Initial repetition drilling may be possible with the whole class, with the software displayed on the large classroom monitor through the teacher's laptop. Pinpoint the key words, click for the narrator's readout and then ask the children to repeat, on an individual basis. This of course is definitely not going to take just one session, and at this point one cannot simply go through all the pages available at one go.

Once repetition drilling is considered sufficient by the teacher, the next step should test the children in recognizing the words before listening to them. Challenge some of the children in each group (or in the whole class using the large monitor) by pointing at a word on screen and asking them to read it. Then, click on the word and let them listen. Train them to discuss each other's way of reading certain words: the computer is always there to give them the right feedback.

Once the children get used to the activities they can be left in groups to experiment on their own. Basic sentence construction may

also be possible through the clicking of individual words. Let the children make the computer read their own sentences by clicking on words in different sequences, creating logical or nonsensical sentences. Observe their reactions.

Additional teaching aid material should be used to complement the computer activities, of course. Reproduce the key words on flashcards. If there is the software available, produce poster-size printouts of one or two of the pages. With suitable software and a decent colour printer this is quite possible. *Print Shop Ensemble III* or its cut-down version *Print Shop Deluxe III*, for instance, enables you to make poster-size images (larger than the normal A4 sheet) which can be hung up on the walls as charts. This program has been provided by the Division to all Year One classes. In a future article we will discuss the creation of poster-size images with this software.

Other Activities

Many other activities not directly related to reading and word recognition can be set up using the software, specifically aimed at enhancing self-expression. Elicit the pupils' comments about the story's sound effects, for instance. Encourage the children to draw scenes or characters from the story. Play short animated sequences without sound, and encourage the pupils to put in their own dialogue and invent other 'versions' of the story. Use the story background to launch a project: *At the Beach*, for instance. The graphics in the program represent an open book with pictures, like a photo album. A good idea is that of creating the children's own photo album entitled *We Went to the Beach*.

Beyond the Software

Vocabulary may be enhanced by going beyond the set number of words presented in the software. In connection with the photo album activity mentioned above, one could get the children to mention other relatives than just Grandma, and introducing other related words such as *Father, Mother, Brother, Sister, Grandpa, Aunt, Uncle, Cousin.*

Conclusion

Most teachers will be able to develop other activities with this software package beyond the ones suggested here. The first step, though, should be that of going through the software thoroughly before presenting it to the children. It is quite obvious that such a package on its own is not enough to develop reading skills and self expression. It should be used in conjunction with the other software packages already available, but it should also be complemented by similar packages which should gradually be introduced in the classrooms.

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