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THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF LANGUAGE
IN
REMEDIAL READING PROGRAMS

by
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A RESEARCH PAPER
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The task of the reading teacher, whether he or she is working with a small group of students or on an individual basis, remains the same. The teacher's ultimate goal is the improvement of students' reading ability. Often this task is approached as though reading existed inside a vacuum. This is because the vast majority of readiness skills tasks are designed for only the visual and auditory aspects of the "words" themselves. The fundamental mental process that reading is built upon is often neglected.

The mental process referred to is primarily verbal and can be defined as language. Obviously, language is primary and can be considered a prerequisite to reading. In the world today there is not one group of people which has not adopted some type of spoken language. However, it should be noted that many of these groups, although they are able to utilize a means of verbal language, are unable to communicate via means of written language.¹

¹R. Jakobson, "Verbal Communication," Scientific American, Sept. 1972, pp. 73-80.

The recent surge of studies on normal language acquisition indicates that children ordinarily master the bulk of rules for speaking and understanding their native language by the time they start school. However, with few exceptions, children at this age have not yet begun to read.²

Authorities have suggested that an important component in a child's ability to learn a language is his biological environment. The human infant is born with the natural ability to assimilate a strategy for introducing the rules of his native language, thus making it possible for him/her to acquire language skills in a relatively short time.³ This skill is achieved without the aid of formal instruction; the child just "learns" naturally.

In comparison, the ability to learn to read is not an innate skill. While learning a first language comes easily and naturally to the "normal" child maturing in a "normal" environment, the ability to read comes only after

²Norma Rees, "The Role of the Speech Pathologist in the Reading Process," from A Special Study Institute on Oral Language Skills Antecedent to Reading, eds. Eleanor DiMichael and Gavin O'Connor (New York State, Jan. 18-19, 1973).

³A. Chomsky, Aspects of Theory of Syntax (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965).

an extended period of formal instruction. However, despite an existing educational system that is committed to teaching children to read, many have considerable difficulties in mastering the skills needed to read.⁴ One conclusion that could be drawn from the above is that reading is parasitic on language.⁵

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship of language and reading. By reviewing recent research, the author illustrates that if one is to adequately deal with the relationship between language and reading, new reading programs must be developed, utilizing language as their foundation. These programs should stress this important relationship and new remedial plans should be designed accordingly.

Definition of Terms

Before reviewing the research, the author found it necessary to clarify certain terms. For the purpose of this paper the following definitions are used:

⁴E. Klasen, The Syndrome of Specific Dyslexia (Baltimore: University Park Press, 1972).

⁵J. F. Kavanagh and I. G. Mattingly, eds., Language by Ear and Eye (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), p. 4.

Reading - "Identification and recognition of printed or written symbols which serve as stimuli for the recall of meaning through past experience and further the construction of new meanings through the reader's manipulation of relevant concepts already in his possession. The resulting meanings are organized into thought processes according to the purposes that are operating within the reader. Such organizations result in modifications of thought, and perhaps behavior."⁶

Communication - "Any means by which man transmits experiences, ideas, knowledge, and feelings to his fellow man. Included under this definition are speech, sign language, gesture, writing, reading, or any other code which permits messages to be converted or transformed from one set of signs to another, e.g., written signs to speech."⁷

⁶Miles A. Tinker & Constance M. McCullough, Teaching Elementary Reading, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 13.

⁷P. Denes & E. Pinson, The Speech Chain (New Jersey: N. J. Bell Laboratories, 1963).

Language - (This definition only concerns itself with spoken language.) "Language is the most common means of communication. In its broadest sense, it is a system composed of sounds arranged in ordered sequences to form words and morphemes.⁸ The rules for combining these elements into sequences or strings that express thoughts, intentions, experiences, and feelings."⁹

Summary

In this chapter the importance of the relationship between language and reading was discussed. Emphasis was placed on the need to develop new reading programs based on the language experience of the child. Chapter I also presented a definition of pertinent terms for the purpose of clarification.

⁸C. Hockett, Modern Linguistics, (New York: MacMillan, 1958).

⁹N. Chomsky, The Formal Nature of Language. Biological Foundations of Language (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1967).

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Language Acquisition

Language is essentially a unique differentiating characteristic between the human being and other forms of life. However, the child is not born with language; he must acquire it.¹ The process of the acquisition of language in children is the result of three major factors: (1) heredity (anatomy and physiology, intelligence, and the innate capacity for language learning); (2) maturation (a gradual unfolding of states of readiness within the child for linguistic performance); and (3) environmental stimulation.²

Language acquisition can be viewed as a process of growth within the child. Strazzulla views this "growth" as a series of functions. These functions consist of the following:

1. Exploring in detail his immediate environment.
2. Listening and analyzing noises, sounds, and words.
3. Thinking about organizing himself around the stimuli.
4. Communications with others about these stimuli through the use of gestures, pictures, sounds, speech, etc.³

¹Helmer Myklebust, "Language Disorders in Children," Exceptional Children, XXII (1956):163.

²Michael Mange and John Irwin, eds., Principles of Childhood Language Disability (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 81.

³Millicent Strazzulla, et al., "The Role of Varied Therapies in Rehabilitation," American Journal of Mental Deficiency. LXI (Jan. 1957):511.

This process begins long before the child is able to correctly articulate a word. Communication may, in a non-verbal pattern, range from a simple gesture to an intricate pantomime; verbally it may be as simple as a meaningful vocalization or as complex as abstract speech.⁴

Components of Language

Language can be categorized into three areas: inner language; receptive language; and expressive language.

Inner language is the symbol system used for thinking, memory, imagination, reason, etc. At the lowest genetic level it is a simple rudimentary association between the word and concrete experience, such as associating the word "mana" with feeding and generalized feelings of well being.⁵

Receptive language involves two processes. One process is the receiving of the auditory and visual stimuli. The second is the comprehension of that received stimuli. A child lacking adequate integrity would be unable to interpret sensory images due to misperception of sensory data.⁶

⁴Ibid.

⁵Myklebust, p. 164.

⁶Robert Smith, Clinical Teaching: Methods of Instruction for the Retarded (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 110.

Language development follows a sequential order: First, inner language must develop; second, receptive language, and lastly, expressive language. Inner and receptive language must develop before a child will be able to communicate through speech.⁷

Relationship Between Language and Reading

There has been a number of studies dealing with relationship of language and reading. A study was conducted with 42 school-age children that related school-age reading, readiness, and listening and speaking skills with early psycholinguistic ability. The children were given measures of vocabulary, sentence imitation, comprehension and production, phoneme discrimination and I.Q. In addition, the children's mothers were assessed for verbal I.Q. and speech style. Three years later, at age six, measures, which included those administered at age three, as well as field independence-dependence, reading readiness and reading skill were given to the children. Significant correlations were found between age 3 and age 6 scores. It was determined from this study that school-age reading, listening and speaking skills are predictable from and correlated with pre-school language skills⁸ with

⁷Myklebust, p. 164.

⁸Karen M. Fisher, "Prediction of Reading Ability From Early Language Skills. Final Report" (Sewell, N.J., Gloucester County College, March 1975).

quotients of less than 85.⁹

Further investigative studies have been conducted into the relationship of reading and language ability. One such study was designed to determine the effectiveness of oral language responses as a predictor of reading achievement in the fourth grade. Specific language responses were associations to the 30 words of the Oral P/S Language Inventory. The responses were classified as paradigmatic if they were illustrative of the relationships of super-ordinate, coordinate, contrast, or part-whole. All other responses were classified as syntagmatic. The California Reading Test was the criterion measure. A median split placed the subjects in high or low groups, the former scoring at or above 3.3 and the latter at or below 3.2. A T-ratio was found and it was significant (.05) the authors of the study concluded.

Another study was conducted into the general language development and reading achievement of British children who were living in a residential care center. All the children were administered the WISC as a measure of I.Q. Language development was assessed by means of the Mill Hill Scale Oral Definitions Form for the 11-14 year old children and the Watts English Language and Vocabulary Test for Young Children for those children below the age of eight.

⁹M. L. Pringle, "Language Development and Reading Attainment of Deprived Children," in Reading: Problems & Practice, ed. Jessie F. Reid (London, 1972).

The Schovell Graded Reading Vocabulary Test and the Schovell Silent Reading Test B were administered to both the age groups as an assessment of reading achievement. At both age levels and for both boys and girls, marked backwardness in language was found with severity of retardation related to the age of separation from the family. Of the tested group, 62% were identified as retarded in reading and language. This is based on the fact that a subject who gives more than 15 syntagmatic responses will score lower on the reading test than one who tends to give paradigmatic responses.¹⁰

Additional studies were conducted assessing syntax attainment and reading achievement. The authors concluded that although causation cannot be assumed from the correlation above ($r = .70$), analysis of redundancy coefficients showed that for the subjects of this study (1,002 2nd grade students) syntax attainment was a predictor of reading achievement. The existence of a causative relationship has implications for both reading diagnosis and instruction. Syntax appears to be a better predictor of reading achievement than intelligence. The findings of this study suggest that a syntax measure should be given diagnostic consideration.

¹⁰Rachel Bickley et al, ed., "Reading: The Right to Participate," Twentieth Yearbook of the National Reading Conference (1971).

The causative relationship of syntax attainment to reading achievement at the second level implies the importance of his/her language experience on a child's reading instruction. Consideration of the results of this study should lead to adoption of reading curriculum that takes advantage of children's prior knowledge of syntax and facilitates their further growth.¹¹

Use of Language in Remedial Reading Programs

The literature on reading instruction continues to make the well documented point of a content relationship between oral language and reading, admonishing teachers to use the natural linguistic cues owned by the learner in learning to read. An ever increasing amount of instructional material featuring the oral language-reading relationship becomes available to teachers each year.¹²

A study was conducted underlining the importance of speech and reading. The author related an experience showing this link. A remedial group of readers met daily to read new books. They were given help with

¹¹Mary McDonnell Harris, "Second Grade Syntax Attainment and Reading Achievement" (May 1975). Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (New York, May 13-16, 1975).

¹²Leif Fearn, "Oral Language, Reading, and Approach Behavior," Language Arts (March 1976), pp. 346-348.

unfamiliar words and encouraged to tell their friends about each story read. The new experience of story telling raised the interest level in the group and helped improve enunciation. There were errors in language, but the printed words had been translated into meaningful concepts. After two weeks the children had gained much self-assurance and had shown new eagerness to volunteer for oral reports. As a result of this experience, the speech and reading combination was further used in the remedial program.¹³

One of the most important areas of reading, comprehension of the written word, has also been linked with language. Instruction in reading comprehension and critical reading skills is often surrounded by vague generalizations. The reader may be told to "rephrase the author's words into your own" or to "read the story and decide whether it is real or make-believe." The reader's problem is in deciding exactly how to go about determining what is real and what is not. In short, how are the first steps of critical reading to be explained to a reader? The vague generalities need to give way to specific language-related teaching techniques.¹⁴

¹³Ruth P. Sawyer, "Better Speech for Better Reading," Elementary School Journal, LXU No. 7, (April 1965), pp. 359-365.

¹⁴John W. Miller, "Linguistic and Comprehension," Elementary English, Vol. 51, (March 1976), p. 853.

Bormuth states that probably the source of this dismal situation (the lack of teacher understanding about reading comprehension) is due to the fact that comprehension is presently defined almost wholly in terms of mental processes. Since mental processes are not directly observable, attempts to describe them turn out to be nebulous and confusing to everyone. This process description leaves the teacher and researcher still groping about trying to decide just what these processes have to do with language.¹⁵

The author offers a possible alternative definition of reading comprehension tasks, keeping the relationship of language and reading foremost. The content of comprehension instruction might be said to be the rules describing how the language system works to transmit information; and the tasks of research in reading comprehension instruction are: (1) to enumerate these rules; (2) to develop teaching tasks for shaping children's behaviors in the manners described by these rules; (3) to organize them into a

¹⁵John R. Bormuth, "An Operational Definition of Comprehension Instruction," in Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of Reading, eds. K. S. Goodman & J. T. Fleming (Delaware: International Reading Assoc. Newark, 1969).

systematic sequence for instruction by determining their relative complexities.¹⁶ Put simply, the task at hand is one of connecting critical reading skills and comprehension to the specific language stimulus, the body of the context read.¹⁷

Another example of a reading program based on language development is Fearn's Performance Reading. In addition to the complex linguistic relationships between oral language and reading, the performance reading approach is concerned with "how" the child learns rather than just "what" he learns. Some of the characteristics of this learning process can be described in terms of approach and avoidance behaviors. There are reasons why so few children adopt an avoidance in aural and oral language development, while almost all children adopt an approach pattern. In the aural and oral language development experience, the learner is in an environment where the sought-after language behaviors (reception and production of talk) occur informally and constantly. Since, in that environment there is no attention paid to formal expectations

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Miller.

for learner reception and production, there is virtually no opportunity for the learner to experience language as aversive and something to avoid.¹⁸

A further characteristic of the oral language learning process is an almost total lack of purposeful sensitivity to readiness by the learner's teachers (the languaged people in the environment). Readiness in language learning is different from readiness in reading because reinforcement follows learner language behavior, behavior which would not occur prior to learner language readiness. Hence, the overwhelming preponderance of children are ready to learn language when they begin learning language because they begin on a schedule defined largely by themselves.¹⁹

Fearn's model defines learning to read as a process somewhat like learning to talk. The responses to learner ineffectiveness is not additional instruction. Rather, it is a return to the basic foundation. Performance-based reading (the oral language reading) recognizes

¹⁸Fearn.

¹⁹Ibid.

that learning occurs in the context of approach and does not re-teach until the learner is ready.²⁰

Summary

Numerous studies have found that many reading tasks have as their foundation acquired language skills. Additional studies have illustrated the high correlation of speech and reading. It has also been found that language ability can be a valid predictor of future reading levels.

Diagnostic reading programs have been developed stressing language ability in conjunction with traditional reading tasks. These programs have met with greater success than existing programs. It seems that language based reading programs are the direction for the future.

²⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER III

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The author has reviewed various research studies demonstrating the close, interdependent relationship of oral language, speech, language development and reading. There has been an examination of language acquisition, components of language, the relationship between language and reading, and the use of language in diagnostic reading programs.

These emerging trends of developing reading programs based on language ability have produced new ideas and concepts. Some of these are as follows:

1. Emphasis on oral language development in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten as an important aspect of reading readiness.
2. Increased time and instruction given during the reading period to the improvement of listening and oral reading skills.
3. Recognition of the similarity of the comprehension skills involved in listening to those involved in reading.

4. Increase in the use of linguistic readers for beginning instruction.
5. Greater perception of the effects of non-standard speech patterns on oral reading and comprehension.
6. More frequent use of textbooks which correlate activities in listening, speaking, oral and silent reading, and writing.
7. Utilization of pupils' written expression as appropriate material for reading activities.¹

In conclusion, the author feels that consideration should be given to present reading programs. At present many programs still exist that treat reading as a specific academic task where the student need only master basic skills. It seems that there exists the possibility that the introduction of language into such a program would increase reading skills. Future reading teachers should become more familiar with language development and incorporate the two to build a strong base from which the student will be able to improve reading ability.

¹Dorothy Spar, Director of Reading for District 27, N.Y.C. from A Special Study Institute on Oral Language Skills Antecedent to Reading, eds. Eleanor DiMichael and Gavin O'Connor (New York State, Jan. 18-19, 1973).

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