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Taking Stock: Language Arts at the Beginning of the Nineties

Sheila Fitzgerald

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For the convenience of examination, the language arts can be divided into two content areas and four processes: the content areas of the language arts are language itself and literature; the four processes include listening and reading (the receptive language skills), and speaking and writing (the expressive language skills). There is a danger in identifying listening and reading as merely "receptive" language skills, however; doing so ignores the fact that readers and listeners are active participants: they compose meaning by the interaction on their prior knowledge, the text, and the context in which the data is received. There is also some danger in dividing the language arts into six separate strands which may appear to lessen their interrelatedness and interdependence. To see if each has achieved its appropriate significance in school programs, however, it is important to examine each language arts strand separately to see that each area is given some direct attention in the curriculum of the elementary and secondary school.

The Language Arts Content Areas

Language

Language is so pervasive in our lives, so vast and complex, that it is no wonder that human beings have gone to great lengths to understand it and to pass those understandings on to the next generation. But the truths about the nature of language often generate fallacies in language arts classrooms at every level. Language is a system of sounds that combine to produce meanings; therefore many think that students should learn phonics. Our language depends on syntax for meaning; therefore, some think that students should concentrate on grammatical terms and structures. English has a huge array of words; therefore, others think students should practice vocabulary drills. English has usage patterns that are acceptable and unacceptable to certain groups of people; therefore, many think students should be drilled on Standard English. English has a history, having roots in a mother tongue but additions from a variety of other languages;

therefore... The list goes on and on.

Current understandings of language acquisition attribute far more respect to the young child's language learning in preschool years than has been granted by most educators. In fact, rather than pumping information into children about language forms, which is apt to be far too abstract for all but the most sophisticated upper grade learners, researchers and enlightened practitioners are examining how young children learn language by using it. This research is being done to determine how school practice in the elementary and secondary grades can extend and deepen language learning in natural ways (Gleason; Harste, Woodward, & Burke). Above all, teachers are seeking strategies for interesting students in the power of language, the variety of ways it can be used and abused, the responses that people have to language use in particular circumstances, etc. Because research has demonstrated that the study of sounds, words, and terms in isolation has little lasting influence on students' ability to use this knowledge consistently in daily life, the study of language in some classrooms has turned away from grammar study, phonics drills, usage worksheets, etc. (Smith). Attempts to make the study of language useful and interesting to students in the 1990's will depend on a radical change in the materials available for instruction.

Literature

American students in grades four, nine, and twelve were included in the research on literature conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Purves and Beach). Results indicate that the best of American readers do well in comparison with students from other countries. The differences between capable and less able students, however, point up some of the problems in developing understandings of literature and attitudes toward it in American schools. In this study and in others (Langer and Smith-Burke), it becomes evident that teachers of able students encourage them to comprehend what they read on a variety of levels, and to respond to the aesthetics of the literature as well as to the content. Teachers of less able students tend to keep the examination of the reading on the surface level, and to limit explorations to personal connections to the piece.

Current attention in literature study at both the elementary and secondary level includes concern over how texts and units of study are initially presented to students to generate interest and purpose for reading. In addition, authorities (Rosenblatt; Purves and Beach) stress

the significance of students' related prior knowledge and experiences for helping them wrestle with the new ideas that will come to them in their reading. Teachers are encouraged to plan thoughtfully for oral and written work following reading so that students will deepen their understandings and extend their comprehension of the literary piece.

A perennial question in literature study is "What should students be expected to read?" Some would define a canon of literature that all children should know at a particular grade or age level. Most authorities (Lloyd-Jones and Lunsford; Sloan) reject this notion as well as censorship of what students should be allowed to read. Most support exposure of elementary and high school students to a wide range of classic and contemporary literature, self-selected as well as assigned readings, books about minority cultures as well as about the dominant American experience, world literature along with American. Book selection is becoming a process that requires the time and thoughtful consideration of teachers and librarians.

As the 1980's draw to a close, the importance of literature for all aspects of the language arts program is recognized by an increasing number of elementary and secondary educators. Many poor elementary and secondary school librarians and inadequate library services, however, will hamper teachers' efforts in the 1990's to provide enriched literature programs for students.

Listening

Listening continues to be the most used-and the most misunderstood- language skill. In 1985 the federal government, in Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, added listening (as well as speaking) to the traditional three R's (Rubin). Although this action by the government did not dramatically influence the direction of language arts instruction in schools over the following twenty-five years, it did initiate an awareness of the importance of listening and some concern over its neglect. Adults spend at least half of their waking listening, and students spend 60% or more of their hours in school listening, yet the curriculum in K-12 schools is woefully lacking in instruction in listening.

The neglect of listening can be explained in part by the common misconception that poor listening is merely a matter of poor attitude and misbehavior rather than believing that effective listening is the result of a set of skills that need to be learned, practiced, and perfected. A second reason for the continuing neglect of listening instruction is that teachers, administrators, and parents often believe that listening is only important as a school subject in the primary grades and less

necessary in the upper grades and high school when students have facility with reading and writing for communication. Finally, teachers lack preparation for teaching listening, and materials for teaching listening are rarely provided.

The increasing significance of technology, particularly the impact of television on the society, has highlighted the importance of listening skills for a few educators and parents (Winick and Winick). Nevertheless, few students at the end of the eighties get any school instruction to prepare them for the influences of today's technology on their attitudes, values, and actions in life. Research supports treating listening as a complex set of skills (Devine) not only significant in its own right but also important for development of the other language skills, particularly for reading, the other receptive language art (Lundsteen). Research also indicates that instruction in listening is probably more necessary as students progress in school than it is in the early years (Devine). (A study of college students found that only 12% were actively listening during a class lecture.) Furthermore, research has shown that listening, including the higher level thinking skills involved in critical listening, can be improved dramatically through quality instruction (Pearson and Fielding).

Perhaps more than any of the other language strands, listening needs to be an agenda item in the 1990's. But will it be? In spite of its importance in all aspects of life inside and outside of school, there is little indication that the general public or the educational community is concerned about the neglect of listening instruction.

Speaking

In 1981 the Carnegie Foundation urged that all students, from the earliest years of formal schooling on, learn not only to read and write but also to listen and speak. Although the importance of speaking was recognized for thousands of years, and the classic theories of communication were founded on an oral society, speaking lost importance to reading and writing with the advent of the printing press. Generally, for the last two hundred years, educators have believed that children would improve their oral communication abilities on their own, just as they learned to speak as babies through everyday encounters with adults. In schools this lack of concern for the development of speaking abilities translated into a preference for quiet classrooms where students were expected to spend their time working on reading and writing. In secondary schools there has been some formal recognition of speaking in the curriculum and in extracurricular activities: Speech classes and forensics groups

are frequently available, but they often are elective classes or special interest clubs rather than learning experiences that all students are required to have. In addition, the high school speech class tends to focus on speech making rather than on the full range of oral skills individuals need on a daily basis.

Rankin's 1927 study of the language arts in daily life determined that at least 30% of waking hours are spent in talking (Devine). The speaking competencies needed for daily living range from conversation and discussion to story telling, reporting, and more. We use language to express ourselves, to dramatize, to inform, and to persuade—all competencies that the schools have responsibility for developing in every student (Phelan). Recent research has also highlighted the significance of speaking competency for the development of the other expressive language art, writing (Thaiss and Suhor). Current interest in "cooperative learning" has demonstrated the significance of "talk" for learning in all subject areas in school (Golub).

As technology and travel diminish distances between people, speaking gains respectability in classrooms, but few schools have well-developed oral language curricula for kindergarten through grade twelve. Speaking needs to be a new focus for the language arts in the next decade.

Reading

Reading continues to get the lion's share of attention in the language arts. In elementary and secondary curricula, however, the term "reading" has had different meanings and has translated into different types of materials for instruction. For at least the last thirty years, elementary schools have viewed reading as a set of word recognition and basic comprehension skills to be mastered. Basal reading series and workbooks have been the primary modes of delivery for these skills, children have been grouped by ability for instruction in basals written to readability formulae, and standardized tests have been the indicators of progress. In contrast, secondary schools followed the time-honored emphasis on literature, usually concentrating on the classics, and depending upon literature anthologies as primary materials.

Results of national exams in reading, such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, show that a significant number of students ages nine to seventeen are able to identify words and comprehend low level reading passages, but that more than half of the students leaving high school are not able to read beyond an intermediate level of proficiency ("NAEP Data"). Furthermore, this study and others (Reed) indicate that many students who can read are choosing not to read for information or for pleasure outside of school.

"Aliteracy," therefore, as well as "illiteracy" are serious national concerns.

Goodlad's study of school demonstrates that students spend little school time actually reading. His research found that elementary students spend only 6% of the school day reading in all subject areas; in middle school and high school the figure drops to 3% and 2% respectively (106-7); most of the considerable school time assigned to "reading" was spent in activities related to reading, such as completing workbook exercises or writing short answers to questions, rather than to reading. This practice followed the prevalent but mistaken notion that skills must be mastered before students can do extensive reading.

Reading, therefore, is currently undergoing a significant paradigm shift in some school districts (Harste). It is once more becoming a language art. In elementary schools there is movement away from controlled vocabulary and controlled syntax basals. "Whole language" perspectives, which interrelate reading with writing and which use children's literature trade books instead of basals, are gaining favor (Goodman et al.). In secondary schools, more attention is given to contemporary literature for adolescents, as well as to classics. Teachers are encouraged to help students develop responses to literature that show higher order thinking and commitment to reading as a life skill (Reed; Whale and Gambell).

Traditional perspectives are so ingrained in many classrooms, however, that widespread changes in reading goals will be difficult to achieve in the 1990's in spite of convincing literature on meaning-focused reading instruction and evidence of increasing aliteracy. Current tests of reading contribute to the problem by maintaining schools' focus on minimal proficiencies in the testing situation rather than on the amount and types of reading students do, and the depth of their understanding of what they read.

Writing

In spite of great strides in research on writing over the last two decades, National Assessment measures of students' writing abilities continue to be discouraging. Except for impressive improvements by minority students, the results in the latest NAEP test (1984) show that nine, thirteen, and seventeen year olds are writing somewhat better than in 1979, and about the same as students wrote in 1974. The overall conclusion of NAEP evaluations is that most American students have poor writing skills (Applebee et al.). Authorities attribute student's lack of proficiency in writing to a combination of causes, the most significant of which

is the absence of regular and substantial practice in putting thoughts on paper (Calkins; Applebee et al.). In elementary and middle schools, workbooks and worksheets which require single word and short phrase answers have often substituted for writing. In secondary schools, writing has been assigned infrequently, and short essays, often no more than a paragraph in length, are typical expectations both in English classes and in other subject areas.

Yet writing instruction has been an area of study over the last twenty years, study that has demonstrated the importance of learning to write, as well as the importance of “writing to learn” in all content areas (Giacobbe; Fulwiler and Young). This scholarship, however, has yet to have much impact on schools except in certain classrooms and school districts. By changing the focus of attention from the “products” of writing to the “processes” students go through as they learn to write, authorities are leading teachers to appropriate methods for helping students understand the complexities of decisions involved in writing: how to generate topics, how to draft ideas, how to revise and edit, how to adapt form and tone to the audience and situation, how to polish a piece for publication, etc. Furthermore, it has become evident that the processes of writing are as applicable to the beginning writer in the preschool as they are to the college-bound high school senior.

Writing instruction holds much hope for progress in the even though many teachers have little formal schooling in the teaching of writing.

So, where do we stand in Language Art Instruction?

Important strides have been made in language arts theory, research, and classroom application in the past decade. Credits should be given, I believe, to the increasing momentum of the writing movement which has focused some attention away from the “products” of writing and onto the “processes,” the strategies students use as they learn to control their thoughts on paper. Writing research and practice has also encouraged a reexamination of reading instruction goals, prompting a return to emphasis on how students come to understand what they read, and how they become lifelong readers. Writing can claim some credit, as well, for encouraging talk in classroom, students talking and listening to peers, and to teachers, as they conference about their writing topics, share their writing efforts, and solve their writing problems. Indeed, there seems to be a growing appreciation of the “arts” of language, not just minimal proficiencies. And, we are beginning to achieve greater understanding and acceptance of the interrelationships of all

of the language arts. As John Dixon says, “Once a teacher sees the ways in which talk, drama writing, and reading all connect, I believe such divisions are wasteful” (Durbin 72).

Although many important steps have been taken, these notions about language arts instruction are not widespread. Even when teachers understand the goals of a good language arts program and their significance for learning in all subject areas of the curriculum, they often encounter obstacles in implementing such programs. Ironically, expense is not a significant barrier to good language arts programs as it often is in other important school goals. Other than a knowledgeable, enthusiastic teacher, a class of willing learners, and a few inexpensive materials, the most important expenses for good language arts instruction are a wonderful, up-to-date library and a librarian who serves the needs of and teachers. Some of the usual “supplies” given to teachers are those that cost huge amounts of money, yet, more often than not, they interfere with quality instruction: textbooks that swallow up the limited instructional time and lessen enthusiasm for learning; workbooks and skill sheets that fragment instruction into decontextualized skills; tests that warp the attention of teachers, parents, and administrators towards the limited language skills that tests are able to measure. If we are to keep the momentum for change that has been started, and if we are to overcome the obstacles, we need to snowball the language arts initiatives of the past decade into the 1990’s and beyond.

To do that, we must first start with ourselves as learners in the art of teaching language arts. There is so much good literature out there now in books and journals it is very difficult to keep up with all the good reading that is available-but the effort is its own reward. Attending local, state, and national conferences also helps us rub shoulders -and ideas -with other teachers who care about language learning as much as we do. Armed with our knowledge and commitment, we are then ready to take on the task of convincing reluctant colleagues that adopting better ways of teaching language arts will increase student learning and motivation, as well as brighten their own teaching lives considerably. We may need to use even stronger voices with administrators, politicians, textbook and test publishers -even parents: Traditions and support for “the way English was taught to me” are not easily uprooted.

In spite of the obstacles we face going into a new decade, I haven’t been as enthusiastic about the prospects for language arts instruction since I taught in the elementary grades in the 1950’s and early 1960’s. That was just before the

schools became subject to the heavy doses of commercialism and federal and state mandates that have governed elementary and secondary education over the last twenty-five years. Yet, even in the halcyon years, we didn't have the commonly shared theoretical perspectives among elementary, secondary, and college teachers of English that we have today, nor was there much possibility that all levels of English language arts teachers would share common pedagogical concerns as was evidenced in the recent English Coalition Conference.

We've made good strides. Let's get on with it!

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