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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S READING MISCUES

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Many journal articles, scholarly reports and books have been published regarding miscues and the predictive/communicative nature of the reading process. Few teachers, however, seem to be aware of these more recent research findings which hold highly significant implications for instruction. How many teachers are aware of the predictive/communicative nature of the reading process? How do they feel about reading behavior that does not process each word in a precise exacting manner? Unless teachers are aware of such concepts and incorporate them in their teaching, research efforts become inconsequential.

The purpose of this study, therefore was to determine teachers' perceptions of children's miscues. That is, when teachers from a given school district observe children's miscues, to what degree do they accept those that:

Are syntactically and semantically acceptable?
Reflect dialect differences among readers?
Share graphic and/or sound similarities with the text but are not syntactically and/or semantically acceptable?

To generate data related to these questions the following procedures were used:

1. A survey instrument was constructed containing 60 miscue items related to the questions referred to in the purpose statement of this study. Each item included a sentence of text followed by a miscue sentence representing the way a reader might have read the text. For example:

Text: Cry all you want *to*.

Child
Read: Cry all you want.

The miscues used in the survey instrument were not obtained from readers especially for this study but were patterned after observed responses reported by Goodman and Burke (1972).

2. After reading each item, teachers were asked to judge the acceptability of miscue sentences by checking one of three columns entitled "Acceptable Reading Behavior (Okay)," "Unacceptable Reading Behavior (Not Okay)," or "Sometimes Acceptable Reading Behavior (Sometimes Okay)."

3. The survey instrument was sent to the 94 elementary teachers, grades one through six, in a local school district adjacent to a midwestern city of 55,000 people. Sixty-one teachers (65%) voluntarily completed and returned the survey.

4. The data was categorized and analyzed according to the questions asked in the purpose statement of the study.

The remainder of this article is a discussion and explication of the findings of this study followed by questions of implication.

Do Teachers Accept Miscues That Are Syntactically and Semantically Acceptable?

For purposes of analysis, the four miscue types given in Table 1 were prioritized starting with those miscues teachers found most acceptable proceeding to those found least acceptable.

TABLE 1

Percentages of Teachers Who Judged Syntactically and Semantically Acceptable Miscues as Acceptable, Unacceptable or Sometimes Acceptable* According to Type and Number

Type of Miscue Items	Number of Miscue Items	Percentage of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Acceptable Reading Behavior (Okay)	Percentage of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Unacceptable Reading Behavior (Not Okay)	Percentage of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Sometimes Acceptable Reading Behavior (Sometimes Okay)
Contractions or Word Order	3	77	4	19
Additions or Deletions	7	53	18	29
Substitutions	11	50	18	32
Tense Changes	3	38	24	38
Averages		55	16	29

*Syntactic acceptability refers to language that is grammatical — sounds like English; semantic acceptability refers to the meaning aspect of language — makes sense.

The first category in Table 1 indicates that when the only difference between the text and the miscue sentence involved the use of contractions and word order, 77% of the teachers responding accepted such reading behavior. These miscues did not seem to alter meaning to any detectable degree.

Table 1 also shows that fewer teachers (53%) accepted miscues involving the addition or deletion of words than they did the first type of miscue listed—probably because the addition or deletion of single words seemed to change meaning more than contractions and/or word order miscues did.

When miscues involved substitutions, Table 1 shows that only 50% of the teachers responding accepted such reading behavior. This, again, probably indicates teachers' sensitivity to the apparent increase in the difference of meaning between the text and this type of miscue and the first two types listed.

The last type of miscue found in Table 1 included three items involving tense changes (N = 3). Miscues with tense changes were accepted as appropriate reading behavior by only 38% of the teachers responding—again probably due to the degree that such miscues vary from the meaning of the text. This type of miscue seemed to change the meaning of the text most of all, even though such changes would probably not constitute significant differences in most contexts.

In summary, it would appear that most of the teachers responding (55%) accepted miscues which were syntactically and semantically acceptable to the degree that they did not deviate from the precise meaning of the text assuming standard usage. Table 1 also shows that a significantly greater number of teachers checked "Sometimes Okay" (29%) than checked "Not Okay" (16%). Why did so many teachers check the "Sometimes Okay" column? Did they have linguistically defensible ideas in mind or did such choices reflect a reluctance to judge the acceptability of such miscues? If teachers were reluctant, why did they feel that way? Finally, how do the teachers who checked "Not Okay" (16%) view the reading process? Do they think of reading as precisely processing each segment of print?

Do Teachers Accept Miscues That Reflect Dialect Differences?

The survey items related to dialect were categorized according to the four types of miscues shown in Table 2.

It becomes quite obvious upon perusal of Table 2 that most of the teachers responding did not perceive of miscues reflecting dialect differences as acceptable reading behavior. Interestingly, items categorized as substandard usage were less acceptable than Black dialect (75% versus 65%). Substandard usage miscue items included substitutions such as don't for doesn't, ain't no for isn't, never for ever and so on.

The third type of miscue in Table 2 (Irregular Pronunciations) included the following four substitutions: pitcher for picture, libary for library, git for get, and wit for with (N = 4). Most teachers (59%) failed to accept these pronunciations as appropriate reading behavior.

TABLE 2

Percentages of Teachers Who Judged Miscues Reflecting Dialect Differences as Acceptable, Unacceptable or Sometimes Acceptable According to Type and Number

Type of Miscue Items	Number of Miscue Items	Percentage of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Acceptable Reading Behavior (Okay)	Percentage of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Unacceptable Reading Behavior (Not Okay)	Percentages of Teachers Who Judged Miscues as Sometimes Acceptable Reading (Sometimes Okay)
Substandard Usage	8	8	75	17
Black Dialect	8	12	65	23
Irregular Pronunciations	4	11	59	30
Other Dialects	3	26	40	34
Averages		14	60	26

The final category of Table 2 (Other Dialects) included only three survey items (N = 3). These miscues included soda for pop, idear for idea and strenth for strength. Forty percent of these teachers judged such items as unacceptable, while 26% approved of such reading behavior. It is surprising that after the apparent status attached to the late President Kennedy's pronunciation of idea (idear) that 56% of the teachers responding failed to accept that particular miscue item as acceptable reading behavior. Maybe is was perceived as appropriate speech but unacceptable reading.

The data in Table 2 clearly indicate that most of the teachers responding did not accept miscues related to dialect as acceptable reading behavior (60%). Only 14% accepted such reading patterns. Again, note the substantial percentage of teachers (26%) who checked the "Sometimes Okay" column. Why did so many teachers fail to accept or reject miscues related to dialect? Are these teachers aware of the role a child's language and past experiences play in the reading process?

Why did the teachers surveyed object so strongly to miscues related to dialect? Could it be that such reading behavior is viewed as inferior or wrong rather than as a demonstration of the reader's uncanny linguistic abilities? That is, in order for a dialect reader to derive meaning from standard text, he must not only process the author's language patterns but seemingly must reprocess them in such a way as to match the language used in his own community. For example, when a child who speaks Black Dialect reads, "John went to the movie," he must first process the text according to the author's grammar rules and then reprocess it according to his linguistic rule system resulting in, "John, *he* went to the movie." These linguistic competencies, however, frequently go unrecognized while such reading behavior is judged unacceptable and interpreted as evidence of the need for additional word attack or word recognition instruction.

Divergent language behavior reflects the traditions and customs of particular language communities and not those ordinarily represented in texts and other published materials. Dialects and their related miscues seem to reflect the social isolation and unacceptability of various socio-economic and racial groups rather than linguistic incompetence. Persons within a given social-racial grouping experience few communication problems, but their way of life, customs and traditions which their language symbolizes are often judged unacceptable by the larger community. It's a matter of social acceptability.

Misconceptions related to dialect and reading, not only prevent children from applying their superb language abilities to the task of learning to read, but may also suggest that children coming from different language communities are unable to learn generally.

Do Teachers Accept Miscues that Share Graphic and/or Sound Similarities With the Text?

Another group of miscue items were included in the survey to determine if any teachers were emphasizing the visual and/or sound similarities between the text and miscues to the degree that meaning was not considered important. The data indicated that a negligible number of teachers (2%) accepted miscues that did not sound like English (syntactically unacceptable) and/or make sense (semantically unacceptable). However, a number of teachers (8%) checked "Sometimes Okay." Are such positions defensible or reasonable? Do the teachers responding in these ways view reading as a communicative process? Most of the teachers (90%), though, did not accept miscues which were similar to the text graphically and/or sound-wise but not syntactially and/or semantically acceptable.

Subsequent Questions

What implications do the findings of this study have for reading instruction? Why were the teachers responding so much more reluctant to accept miscues that reflect dialect differences than those in keeping with standard usage? Why did so many of the teachers responding check the "Sometimes Okay" column? What did these teachers have in mind? Are they confused?

This study, as is the case with many research projects suggests more questions than answers. The one finding of this study, however, that appears highly significant regards teachers' negative perceptions of miscues related to dialect. Is it possible not to accept children's language and still view them as worthwhile individuals? When value judgments are made regarding the acceptability of children's language aren't the experiences that such language represents also being judged? In turn, don't such experiences collectively represent who the child is? Sociolinguistic questions such as these seem to suggest that teachers' negative perceptions of miscues related to dialect might have a much more deleterious effect on children's feelings of self-worth than on their reading achievement.

Do teachers' perceptions of miscues related to dialect pertain more to a concern for how such linguistic behavior affects students' reading or to a subconscious attitude toward divergent life experiences which dialects reflect? If the latter is the case will increased intellectual understanding of how such miscues function linguistically in relation to the reading process change teachers' perceptions significantly? Or will such reading behavior be used subconsciously to classify children socially?

In conclusion, it is hoped that this exploratory study will encourage teachers to view reading as a highly complex communicative/language-processing phenomenon. Such a point of view suggests that most miscues do not cause communication problems but constitute legitimate linguistic behavior. Miscues emerge as a reader becomes involved in the process of predicting the thoughts of an author in light of his own particular thoughts and language patterns. Miscues enable a reader to apply his implicit knowledge of language (syntax) and his perceptions of his world (semantics) to the task of decoding print into meaning. However, if reading is viewed as the processing of each segment of print in a precise manner, reading instruction will be restricted to "perfect reading" not fully capitalizing on children's understandings and implicit language abilities which make learning to read possible.

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