



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 16
Issue 1 *October 1975*

Article 6

10-1-1975

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Recommended Citation

Moe, A. J. (1975). Using the Child's Oral Language in Beginning Reading Instruction. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 16 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol16/iss1/6

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USING THE CHILD'S ORAL LANGUAGE IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

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Reading should be considered a continuation of the language acquisition process and as such the early reading instruction, including pre-reading literary experiences, must build upon the language acquired in the pre-school years. As with oral language, in reading also, the child must discover the theory of his language and he must do so with relatively small amounts of data about his language. In the process of acquiring oral language in the pre-school years, the child must mimic, try out, and accept or reject his new information. In reading, the process is the same except that the learning may be structured by the teacher so the child makes fewer mistakes and may be led to the acceptance of new generalizations with greater efficiency than with oral language learning. Some means by which this may be achieved will be discussed. However, a brief review of the language acquisition which has taken place prior to kindergarten will be presented first.

Pre-School Language Learning

A fact to be considered paramount by all those who teach language skills to children is that oral language is *the* language; other language skills such as reading and writing must be based upon the child's oral language.

By the time the child has reached four years, he can produce all but four or five sounds; these sounds (represented in writing by r, l, th, wh, and tl) are mastered by most children by age six or seven, but some children are unable to produce one or more of them until age eight. What the child acquires takes place through informal auditory learning whereby the child gradually develops the ability to discriminate the gross sounds and then through continued listening and speaking works these gross sounds to finer and finer discriminations until he can both hear and produce the sounds. It should be noted, however, that the child can auditorily discriminate many sounds which he cannot orally produce.

Between a year and a half and five years of age, listening and speaking vocabularies expand greatly. Although the research is not in total agreement, evidence suggests that upon entrance to first grade the child can listen to and understand between 10,000 and 25,000 different words. That

same child can speak between 2,000 and 15,000 different words. Even if these figures were cut in half, the child's stock of words—his internal dictionary—is still tremendously large. It is so large, that very rarely in reading, writing, or spelling instruction will he encounter a word that he does not speak.

Concurrent with phonological development and the acquisition of listening and speaking vocabularies is the development of word arrangements or syntax. A child's knowledge of syntax takes longer to develop, however. The child's first effort at sentence construction result in what is often referred to as telegraphic speech. In telegraphic speech the child leaves out words, usually the least important words; thus, "Mommy driving the car," becomes "Mommy drive car," for the two-year-old child. Word order and content words are maintained and words omitted are usually structure words. Meaning is conveyed, however, and the child is communicating in every sense.

As the child is able to synthesize his knowledge of vocabulary and his ability to arrange words properly he develops a knowledge of grammar. Knowledge of grammar develops rapidly also. So rapidly, that according to Gleason (1969) "by the age of thirty-six months many children can produce all of the major English sentences up to about ten words in length." The development of syntax does continue to develop after the age of thirty-six months, of course, but for most children the correct use of *their* grammar is mastered by five or six years of age. Refinements continue to take place usually through the seventh year although the evidence now indicates that several aspects of syntax may not be learned until eight or nine years of age, or even later.

Helping the Child Establish a Match Between Oral and Written Language.

The language the child encounters in books is "often not a written version of speech patterns the child already knows (Cazden, 1972)." One of the best means of helping children acquire the "match" between their oral language and book language is to have the child listen to stories read out loud.

The reading of stories to children should begin in the first week of kindergarten, probably the first day. The stories, of course, should be about interesting topics using words already familiar to the child. By listening to stories told by the skillful storyteller the child will learn that book language is in many respects more efficient. There is little redundancy since the words are arranged so as to convey the meaning of the story without repetition which is common in the oral language. This type of pre-reading literary experience will enhance early reading achievement.

Sometime later the child will learn that while book language has the disadvantage of less redundancy and lacks the inflections of speech, it does have the advantage of allowing for reflection and re-reading.

A comment about kindergarten instruction is appropriate here. From a language development point of view, kindergarten is extremely important. Not just because the child is offered new people with whom to com-

municate, but also because he begins to learn about and use the language of formal instruction and the school. And because language is used to provide structure to events, structure that he may not have encountered in his home.

Using the Child's Oral Vocabulary in Establishing a Beginning Reading Vocabulary

The child's listening and speaking vocabularies are so broad even if he's disadvantaged that it may be difficult to know which words to introduce first. This selection may be determined by 1) choosing those words that interest him, these are usually content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives), and 2) by choosing words he needs to learn very early, the structure words.

Through dictation to his teacher, the child may express his thoughts in his words and these words may become the words he learns to read. Where this becomes a total approach to the teaching of reading it is known as the language-experience approach.

However, for those teachers who use some other approach, there is no reason why stories created by the child cannot occasionally be used for reading instruction. And the child's language is usually much more diverse than that he encounters in his early books.

It should be emphasized that the written word should not replace the child's oral language activities and the beginning reader should be allowed continued daily opportunities to talk to his peers. This opportunity for talking allows for continued oral language development and it allows the teacher to observe the child's language and note problems in articulation and usage. The teacher should be aware of what the child says and how it compares to published reading materials.

Another concern in the selection of the beginning reading vocabulary is the degree to which the ability to read a word or words will aid the child in the learning of new words. The child will learn a number of words by memorizing them or, as it is sometimes called, by sight. Helping the child transfer his knowledge of known words to the learning of new words will be discussed in the next section.

Helping the Child Acquire Sound-Symbol Relationships

If a child has learned a few words which he recognized at sight, he has learned the rudiments of sound-symbol relationships. What the child must acquire, however, is an understanding of phoneme-grapheme correspondence so that he does not have to learn each new word he encounters as a "sight word." What the teacher should attempt to do is lead the child to the point where the child is able to make generalizations about the sound-letter relationships of our language.

The knowledge of sound-letter relationships as it relates to reading and spelling is usually called phonics. Unfortunately, because of the variety of approaches and materials available in this area, and the differing viewpoints, phonics remains somewhat of a mystery for many teachers. Two prerequisites, auditory and visual discrimination, must be considered since

the integration of these skills, as they relate to the sounds of letters of English, results in phonics knowledge.

Normal children acquire the ability to discriminate among similar sounds at a very early age; if they didn't they could not communicate orally. They do not, however, discriminate among isolated phonemes which they are often (probably mistakenly) required to do in some phonics activities. The child's auditory discriminations have been made among words in the context of other words and the ability to discriminate among isolated words requires some training, but most children learn this kind of activity quickly. Most kindergarten children can learn to do the kinds of auditory discrimination exercises found in reading readiness tests quite easily and they will do them very well.

Normal children have also acquired the ability to discriminate among visually similar figures like words and letters by the age of four. The ability to discern differences among words which are visually similar is a problem for only a very few first-grade children.

Both auditory and visual discrimination skills are necessary before the children learn phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Then the child should be led to integrate these auditory and visual skills. For example, consider the child who has learned the words *father*, *for*, *food*, and *fun* and has been led to see the relationship between the initial sound and initial letter of each word. If that same child has learned *at*, *cat*, *sat*, *mat* and *rat* and has also been led to see the relationship between the sound and the letters *at*, then, hopefully when the child encounters *fat* for the first time he will be able to decode it or say it by himself. This is an example of how children should be guided to transfer learning.

This type of teaching is predicated on a fundamental principle of psychology which allows the child to arrive at generalizations and then apply the generalizations in learning. There are a number of ways of doing this in phonics instruction, but perhaps one of the best is through the use of spelling patterns and word families.

In the structuring of phonics exercises it is important to consider the child's ability to articulate sounds. Those which develop late such as the sounds represented in writing by *r* and *l* perhaps should be delayed in favor of speech sound developed early - those represented in writing by *b*, *d*, *m*, *n*, *t*, *p*, and *s*, for example.

Three aspects of the child's language as they relate to beginning reading instruction have been discussed here. It is this writer's belief that the efforts of classroom teachers to apply knowledge of the child's language acquisition to the teaching of reading will improve student achievement.