



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 24
Issue 3 April 1984

Article 3

4-1-1984

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Recommended Citation

Dole, J. A. (1984). Beginning Reading: More than Talk Written Down. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 24 (3). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol24/iss3/3

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BEGINNING READING: MORE THAN TALK WRITTEN DOWN

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Reading teachers who have worked with beginning readers sometimes are witness to that moment of "Aha!" when a child first makes the connection between talk and print. At such a moment the child stops reading, looks up in surprise and says, "Oh, I get it! It's just talk written down!" This wonderful comment reflects several important learnings for the child, who has come to understand the relationship between speech and print. Further, the child understands that reading serves a communicative function, that reading is part of the larger language process, and that reading is not merely "barking at the words".

These important learnings seem to be essential to children's growth as readers. The irony is that we, as teachers, must not make the mistake of assuming that reading is just "talk written down". Teachers need to understand that written language differs from spoken language in important ways.

Psycholinguists have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between spoken and written language, and have much to tell teachers about this relationship. Rubin (1980), Smith (1982) and Schreiber (1980) are three theorists whose works have important practical application for teachers of beginning readers. In this article I will discuss their observations and ideas about spoken and written language, and present some teaching strategies for beginning readers based on the theories presented.

DIFFERENCES IN CUES

There are some important differences between speech and print which, at first glance, we might overlook. Spoken language consists of sounds. These sounds are translated into symbols, often letters, in written language. Children learn this sound-symbol relationship fairly easily. In spoken language, however, meaning is conveyed through other phonetic cues as well as sounds: intonation, the rise and fall of the voice; stress, the accenting of words and syllables; and pause, the momentary lapse between sentences and phrases.

Some of these phonetic cues are translated into written language through punctuation, capitals or italics, but other phonetic cues have no written counterpart. For example, Schreiber (1980) notes that there is a subtle pause in spoken language between the subject and predicate of the sentence: "Our dog's bark sometimes frightens people." This sentence is not unique. Indeed, as we speak, we automatically group words into phrases, and hesitate or pause between these phrases.

Schreiber argues that young children may rely on these types of phonetic cues to gain meaning in spoken language more than adults do. In order to gain reading fluency, children need to learn to compensate for the lack of these phonetic cues in written language. When confronted with the sentence:

"A man and a woman are juggling things in the air."

children must group or "chunk" the words into meaningful phrases without any spoken or written cues to help them. Thus, part of learning that reading is "talk written down" involves learning to read in phrases in the same way we speak in phrases.

DIFFERENCES IN CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

A second important difference between speech and print involves the contextual constraints placed on each system of language. Before young children enter school, most of their experiences with spoken language are conversation in which they are active and knowledgeable participants. In these conversations, both listener and speaker usually have a shared knowledge base, and a common, immediate environment or context. The structure of spoken language, in turn, reflects these commonalities. A child says "Give it to me," knowing that the listener knows exactly what "it" refers to, and who "me" is. I recall our five-year-old neighbor ringing my doorbell and saying to me, "Is she here?" He knew that I knew that "she" referred to my five-year-old daughter. Smith (1982) provides a good adult example of these types of truncated conversations in spoken language:

"Coffee?"

"Please!"

Because of a shared context and environment, speaker and listener need to say little, and yet have no difficulty understanding one another.

An additional aspect of this shared context in the spoken language of conversations is the availability of feedback and correction. Young children are aided in their conversations by the opportunity of listeners to ask questions and receive clarification when they don't understand. Children know that they have the resources to understand and to make themselves understood.

Written language opens up an exciting new world to children, but a world which poses uncertainties as well as opportunities. Rubin (1980) describes the written world as one which is more abstract and less personalized for children. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, children are exposed to unfamiliar objects and events. Or, they may be exposed to someone, the writer, who may not have a shared knowledge base with the reader.

Furthermore, the language encountered in written form may be largely unfamiliar to children. Sentence structure is different; sentences may be longer and more complex. Vocabulary is often different; new and unfamiliar words may be encountered. Unfamiliar expressions may be used. Story structure and organization may be new and different from anything children have previously exper-

ience. All of these components are potential sources of difficulty for children.

Then, as if these differences were not enough, we need to remember that written language does not offer the opportunity for feedback and correction between the message-giver and receiver. In this one-way communication, children cannot ask questions when they don't understand.

Children need to adjust to contextual and structural differences between spoken and written language. They need to learn to call up information from their background experiences and also from the written context of print to make up for the lack of a shared context between the writer and the reader. They need repeated exposures listening to and reading stories with varied sentence structures and story organization to become familiar with the nature of the written language. Lastly, they need to learn strategies to use when they encounter something in their reading that doesn't make sense.

DIFFERENCES IN PURPOSE AND FUNCTION

A third and final source of difference between spoken and written language lies in the purpose and function of each. Rubin (1980) argues that young children engage in conversations for specific purposes—to have their needs met, to gather information, to persuade and cajole. Halliday (1975) describes similar functions of spoken language for young children.

Written language, however, may serve different functions. Books are often written to entertain, to inform or to describe and explain. They are not written to satisfy children's immediate needs, nor are they child-initiated. It takes time for children to learn the purpose and function of written language, and how print is and is not related to spoken language.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Reading is much more than "talk written down". Children need to make fairly sophisticated adjustments in their understanding of language, its purpose, structure, and function as they learn to read. I have already described some adjustments and learnings that are necessary for children to make. Below I have listed ways that teachers can help children make the transitions from talk to print.

Reading aloud to children. Many teachers read aloud to their children, but the theories presented here highlight the importance of this activity. By listening to good literature children learn new vocabulary, different sentence patterns and different story structures. For example, when children listen to E.B.White's Charlotte's Web, they are exposed to "congratulations," "humble," "sedentary," "supreme," and "gullible." When they listen to stories like the Six Chinese Brothers by Chen Houtien they hear an ancient tale about six brothers who outsmart their king, and story pattern that is typical of most fairy tales. As they listen to Uri Shulevitz' Dawn, they hear language as metaphor, "The moon lights a rock, a branch, an occasional leaf. The mountain stands guard,

dark and silent."

As teachers we need to read aloud to children every day. We need to talk to them about the language they hear in good literature and ask questions to guide their understanding. For example, after reading a chapter in Charlotte's Web, teachers can say, "We have heard the word 'congratulations' used many times in this chapter. Can anyone tell me what it means? Who can use the word 'congratulations' in a sentence? When would you give someone your 'congratulations'? When wouldn't you want to say that to someone? Let's add this word to our vocabulary chart, and it can be our word for the week."

Teachers can use similar questioning techniques to guide children's understanding of story structures and different language patterns. Such instructional time is important for helping children understand some of the functions of written language which differ significantly from the oral language with which they are most familiar.

Writing and Authorship. An important teaching strategy for helping children understand the purposes for print involves writing and becoming authors of books. There are two components to this strategy: 1) allowing extensive opportunities for children at the primary grade levels to write about what they know; and 2) having children "publish" their writing in home-made books. Graves and Hansen (1983) describe a primary grade classroom in which children write frequently. They draw from their own experiences, environment and language, to write about things that are important to them. They then "publish" their writing in home-made books and read and share what they have written. A special chair in the room is designated at the "author's chair." In this chair children read their writing aloud and are questioned by their classmates. These children also study the works of authors, such as Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak.

All of these activities help children become familiar with written language and feel comfortable in the written world of books. Children come to understand how print can be used to entertain and inform and to communicate with others. Additionally, the children's home-made books help close the gap between the unknown world of authors and the real world of children.

Language-experience. The language-experience approach to the teaching of reading is a well-known teaching strategy which helps children connect their own language to print. As a class or in a small group children share a common experience (a trip to the zoo, a new hamster in the classroom) and then write about that experience. If children are too young to write themselves, they can dictate their stories while a teacher or aide writes down their words. Children then read and share their stories with the class. Class books and individual booklets can be made from these stories, and the stories can be displayed and read again and again.

The language-experience approach ensures that children write and become authors of books. Like the writing strategy discussed

above, the language-experience approach allows children to use their own experiences, environment, and vocabulary. They can read their stories because the language is familiar to them. A special affinity for their stories exists because they created them. Hence, written language becomes meaningful and serves a new purpose.

Method of repeated readings. Samuels (1979) describes this teaching strategy as one in which children are asked to read a story aloud a number of times until fluency is achieved in that one story. This method can be used with a single child or with a small group of children. Members of small groups may read to each other or into a tape recorder. Providing children with a specific purpose for the oral reading is recommended. For example, older remedial readers can prepare a story to be read to younger children. Younger children can prepare a story for their peers during story time.

Schreiber (1980) argues that the success of this method may arise from the fact that children come to recognize the kind of phrasing that is necessary to make sense of reading -- phrasing that is explicit in spoken language but implicit in written language. This is an especially good strategy to use with children who word-read and clearly fail to make the connection between written language and spoken language.

Reader's theatre. In reader's theatre, children translate stories into plays that have identifiable characters, roles, plots and scripts. Children then act out the plays in drama style. This technique can be used with most stories and at any age level -- first graders can create plays from many of the stories in their basal readers. For example, they can read the story of the "Three Billy Goats Gruff," and then create a play to present to their peers. In their preparation for the play, they must translate from print to speech. Thus, the written words, "Who's that tripping on my bridge?" become spoken words, and children can more easily connect the two.

Beginning readers vary in their knowledge of the relationship between speech and print. Some children enter school with a rich knowledge about print. Others enter with little background and need extensive practice relating the two. In spite of these differences, most children successfully learn the connection between speech and print without formal instruction. It is important, however, for teachers to keep the differences and similarities in mind as they teach beginning readers. In this way teachers may assist children who are experiencing difficulty connecting speech to print. The strategies presented here should be particularly useful for these children and may well assist them in their learning to read.

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