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Teaching Metalinguistic Skills To Enhance
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This article focuses on practical classroom ideas for enhancing early literacy learning by teaching a broad range of metalinguistic skills. These skills include phonemic and word awareness, but focus largely on syntactic and pragmatic skills in order to give children a richer understanding of language and its functions. Theoretical background is provided along with activities that can be used in the primary classroom.

TEACHERS TODAY ARE DEEPLY concerned with the literacy development of low-income and minority children (Snow, 1991). Not only do these children lag behind children who are more economically and socially advantaged, but the gaps between their achievement and the achievement of others become greater as they enter the middle elementary grades (Snow, 1991).   In fact, less than half of these disadvantaged children will achieve literacy skills beyond a basic level (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988).   Recent research has focused on emergent literacy or the development of literacy related skills prior to formal reading instruction (e.g., Bissex, 1980; Heath, 1982; Snow & Ninio, 1986; Sulzby, 1986; Teale, 1986). Much of this research has been related to knowledge about print and phonemic awareness. While successful beginning readers need to have skills in letter recognition, phoneme segmentation, and word recognition, they also need "broad cultural understandings about literacy, its value and its uses" (Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, and Kurland, 1995, p. 37). In other words, children need to learn how language works in addition to acquiring language skills.

Children learn about language through social interaction. In her work, Catherine Snow (1991) suggests that social interaction plays an important role in predicting a child's oral language achievement and in turn, this achievement may predict success in learning literacy skills. According to Snow, et al. (1995), "the prerequisites for literacy acquisition [should include] print knowledge, culture of literacy, metalinguistic awareness, and decontextualized oral language skills" (p. 38). This has many implications for the kindergarten and first grade classroom. Young children need to develop metalinguistic awareness or the ability to think about and manipulate the structural features of spoken language (Tunmer, Herriman, & Nesdale, 1988, p. 136).

Metalinguistic Ability

Metalinguistic ability can be divided into four broad categories (Tunmer, et al., 1988):

- phonological
- word

- syntactic
- pragmatic awareness

Phonological and word awareness refer to the ability to think about and use phonemes and words. Syntactic awareness is the ability to think about the structure of language. The final category, pragmatic awareness, involves the purposes for which we use language (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Perhaps with so much emphasis being placed on the development of phonological awareness, other aspects of language are being ignored. We believe that in a balanced literacy program, attention must also be placed on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic components of language learning.

Of the four types of metalinguistic abilities, phonological and word awareness have received the most attention (Tunmer, et al., 1988). Many Kindergarten and first grade teachers predominately focus on these aspects of metalinguistic development. This is understandable because there is much evidence to support that phonemic awareness is a powerful predictor of later reading achievement (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Lomax and McGree, 1987; Tunmer & Nesdale, 1985). Because there are many resources for teachers on how to provide instruction that aids children in acquiring and developing phonemic awareness, we have chosen to focus this paper on instructional practices which teachers of emergent and early readers can use to enhance the learning of these other often overlooked aspects of language learning.

Syntactic Awareness

Syntactic awareness is an understanding for the structure of our language and influences reading development by enabling readers to monitor their comprehension processes and by helping children acquire useful word recognition skills other than sound symbol correspondence. (Tunmer et al., 1988; Roth, Speece, Cooper, De La Paz, 1996). Children with a good ear for the structures of standard English as well as literary structures are more skilled at trying out different pronunciations of words with uncommon spellings until they find the one that "sounds right" and "makes sense" in terms of standard language structures. This puts children who speak English as a second language or in an informal

register (Joos, 1967) at a disadvantage. For instance, the pattern "ough" is pronounced differently in each of the following words: dough, cough, and rough. In order to identify these words, a successful reader must know the different pronunciations for the spelling pattern, have word knowledge, and have a sense of what would be appropriate syntactically.

Syntactic awareness is a skill that even young children can develop. Children under the age of two demonstrate knowledge of syntactic awareness when they understand the difference between two sentences where the subject and predicate are reversed. Very young children understand the difference between "Mommy is calling Daddy," and "Daddy is calling Mommy." As children mature, their own sentences grow in length and complexity. This sophistication allows them to understand and use more complex language (Snow et al., 1998).

Children become more sensitive to semantic and syntactic features in reading as they mature and have more opportunities to use language. These skills develop dramatically in grades one through three (Muter & Snowling, 1998).

If syntactical awareness is a fundamental language skill that children need to become successful readers, we need to ask how teachers can provide instruction that scaffolds the development of these skills. There are several strategies that we have found to be effective.

Teachers regularly engage in shared, interactive and guided writing with their students, but for the vast majority of time they model concepts of print, print conventions, and phonics skills. We have found that if time is spent modeling and thinking aloud about the structure of language and especially written language, children begin to internalize this knowledge. Following is a transcript of what this conversation and writing might look like:

T: "I want to write about our trip to the zoo yesterday and I need your help." "What would be a good way to start my story?" Turn to your neighbor and discuss possible ways to begin. (Children talk)

T: Who would like to share what they discussed? Jeremy.

S1: We think it would be good to start with "We went to the zoo yesterday."

T: Why do you and your partner think that is a good idea?

S1: It sounds like other beginnings.

T: Could we write the sentence another way using the same words?

S2: Yesterday we went to the zoo.

T: Are both ways correct?
(Kids nod)

T: Does one sound more like how we talk? ...Does one sound more like book language?

The above vignette shows a conversation in which the teacher is deliberately focusing the children's attention on the differences between language patterns used in writing and speaking.

Another example illustrates how interactive writing can be used to help students who speak in nonstandard English develop an ear for more formal structures. Notice that the teacher uses this opportunity to teach explicitly.

S: "We gots to go to the zoo yesterday."

T: Yes, we did get to go to the zoo yesterday. When we write we need to use formal language like we find in books. So we would write "We got to go to the zoo yesterday."

With an ESOL student, a teacher may find it necessary to provide more scaffolds and conduct this as a guided writing session. In this case, the teacher would work with one or two students and guide them as they write the sentences on their own papers.

S: We get to go to the zoo yesterday.

T: (Teacher writes both sentences as she speaks) We get to go to the zoo tomorrow. Yesterday we got to go to the zoo. Now you say your sentence using the word got.

S: (Teacher writes the sentence as the child says it.) We got to go to the zoo yesterday.

This would be followed up by making word cards for both of these sentences and having the child put the words together to make two correct sentences. After repeated practice and when the teacher is confident that the child can correctly reassemble the sentences, they will be sent home.

Pragmatic Awareness

Another kind of metalinguistic ability is pragmatic awareness. Pragmatic awareness is the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts (Halliday, 1975, 1977; Snow et al., 1998). Snow et al. suggests that children develop pragmatic awareness in three areas. The first is conventional speech, such as requesting something, getting attention, or describing something. In the second area, children develop conversational skills like taking turns, sticking to a topic, and expanding a topic. The third area deals with producing extended autonomous speech like narratives, explanations, and definitions. Halliday (1975, 1977) explains that children develop socialized speech and an understanding for the functions for which they use it through interaction with others. Understanding the various uses for and the structure of language (Moore, 1995) are two areas that are problematic for poor readers. By teaching children to "tune in" to the structure of language, children's reading skills will be strengthened. Teachers can introduce the concept of text structure including the structure of narrative text and uses of language through teacher read alouds and shared reading. Both the syntactical features and the pragmatic functions of language are components that build metalinguistic knowledge.

A teacher read-aloud supports the development of syntactic and pragmatic knowledge because it invites children to participate in the reading process with a text that is often too difficult for them to read on their own. Teachers model good reading and thinking behaviors. Children participate in rich discussions about carefully chosen books which exhibit or possess the desired characteristics. Read-alouds help children develop schema and expectations for different types of text and invite children to become engaged and motivated. Emergent storybooks are particularly useful for teacher read-alouds. They are students' introduction to the wonderful world of literature and reading. These

books are *not* intended serve as texts for teaching students to decipher print.

Emergent Storybooks should tell a wonderful story that children want to hear over and over again and have a basic story structure with a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. The characters, often animals or toys, are easy for children to identify with and will serve as a young child's first independent reading as they approximate the reading process with very familiar text. These books contain a rich literary language and provide many language learning opportunities. One example might be a discussion about the use of imagery in creating the setting. A first grade teacher might choose Leo Lionni's *It's Mine* as a read-aloud. This story, with its memorable characters, basic storyline, and rich language introduces emergent readers to the use of imagery to develop setting. The very first page reads *In the middle of Rainbow Pond. There was a small island. Smooth pebbles lined its beaches, and it was covered with ferns and leafy weeds.* The teacher could read this page and say something like, "Leo Lionni has painted me a picture with his words. If I think about these words as I read I can create a picture in my mind. I can even think about last summer when I went camping near a pond and I can recall how the ferns and weeds were growing all around. Turn to your neighbor and talk about the picture you see in your mind." After a few minutes the teacher might share some conversations they overheard and then go on reading. This book could be revisited many times for many purposes.

Shared Reading actively engages readers in the reading process. As the name implies, the teacher and students share the responsibility for the reading of the text. A shared reading text should tell a good story and have characters and situations for which children can relate. The illustrations should be attractive and support the text. The text should contain rich memorable language that is predictable with a familiar or cumulative sequence. Every child should have access to the print. While shared reading texts are usually in big book form with large print, in some cases a shared reading might involve each child having a copy of the text. Shared reading provides opportunities to investigate the workings of print with a teacher who is providing scaffolding and modeling. The primary distinction between a shared reading text and an

emergent storybook is that a shared reading text is meant to be read by the students and teacher while an emergent storybook should be read by the teacher and will generally be above the reading level of most of the children.

Narration, storytelling, or oral descriptions are forms of discourse that serve as an important transition between oral language and literacy acquisition. Therefore, it stands to reason that children's discussions during and after a teacher read aloud as well as oral story retellings will assist them in acquiring skills that are likely to contribute to their later success in reading. A child's prior experience with syntactical structures of written and spoken language, the pragmatic aspects of language, story structure, story comprehension, and story production may be influential in learning to read and developing the ability to comprehend text.

Additionally, children need many opportunities to have real conversations where they practice describing and explaining things to others. Teachers can facilitate these conversations, but it is important to maintain high expectations for students to use complex and varying sentence structures. This will not happen quickly or easily. Teachers must provide lots of modeling, scaffolding, and give explicit feedback to students as they are learning how to converse with one another. A fishbowl activity may be useful for helping children understand what a "real" conversation and/or discussion "sounds and looks like." For example, the teacher would ask her class to form a circle on the floor and she might invite one student to sit in the center with her to demonstrate a conversation about a nonfiction book. In this case, the discussion is about how nonfiction books use both text and pictures to help the reader understand the concepts being discussed. The children would use sticky notes to mark places in their nonfiction texts where they learned something new by using both text and pictures.

T: Michael, when I was reading this book, I learned that frog's ears are called tympana and that they look like flat circles just behind the eyes. The picture helped me understand what the words said. Did you find a place in your book where words and pictures together helped you understand better?

S: In my book about turtles, I learned that turtles that live on the land have elephant-like feet. Sea turtles have flippers like paddles and turtles which live in fresh and salty water have webbed feet. The pictures showed me exactly how their feet look.

T: How interesting, Michael. I did not know that sea turtles had such different feet from other water turtles. In my book about frogs, I learned about a flying tree frog that has large webbed feet that puff up like parachutes. The picture was really helpful, because I could not imagine what its feet really looked like. As a reader of nonfiction, it is so important to know that the pictures and text work together to help me understand the information better.

After the demonstration, the teacher would discuss it with the class. The teacher would help the students recognize that the conversation was focused on this strategy for reading nonfiction text. She would then ask students to work in pairs to discuss the places in their own nonfiction text where they used text and pictures together to better understand the material.

Conclusion

Downing (1979) likens language to a glass through which children view the world (in Snow, et al., 1998, p.45). At first they do not suspect that it has its own existence or aspects of construction, yet in order to grow in literacy this perception must change. Children must treat language as an object of thought. They must develop metalinguistic awareness or the ability to think about and play with language apart from its meaning. Today in the United States, the most powerful nation in the world, many children continue to fail to acquire even basic literacy skills. We believe that most teachers have the structures in place for effective instruction, but need to increase the direct and explicit teaching of metalinguistic skills and facilitate children's use of language as a tool for thinking. Because of the predictive power of these metalinguistic skills on reading accuracy and comprehension, children who do not receive quality literacy experiences in their pre-school years must be provided with intensive instruction when they arrive in Kindergarten. Teachers can

support emergent and early readers by teaching these language skills explicitly during modeled, shared, and guided reading as well as during interactive writing. Much time must be spent modeling and talking about the uses and functions of language. Children need ample time to discuss and explore ideas with peers and teachers, to practice using language for different purposes, and to learn how oral language relates to the written word. Simply put, if adequate time is devoted to developing oral language, metalinguistic skills, and critical thought processes in young literacy learners, more children will successfully learn to read in the early grades.

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