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David L. Brown
Texas State University

L. D. Briggs
Texas State University

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LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN
AND THE SYNTAX OF BASALS

David L. Brown
L. D. Briggs
East Texas State University
Commerce, Texas

From an early age, children are aware of the various aspects of language. They are consciou of language before any formal teaching of grammar or usage, and this awareness comes from naturalistic experiences. Children spend their early years experimenting with language, practicing language, and expanding word meanings based on their personal experiences and interactions with others. Therefore, young children's vocabularies are replete with meaningful concepts developed during the preschool years.

When children enter the first grade, they are inducted into the world of the basal reader. They are taught phonics and other word analysis skills which are considered by some researchers (Guszak, 1978; Otto, 1977) to be prerequisites for producing effective readers. Children are expected to learn to read using stories which tend to be unrealistic and nonsensical; however, the preprimer and primer stories are not known for their literary quality. Nevertheless, the natural creative abilities of children tend to be secondary to the standard reading curriculum.

Although basal reader series, in general, have undergone a slow metamorphosis, it is still questionable whether children's natural language development and abilities were considered when making these changes. Sampson (1982) concluded that children exposed to preprimers and primers actually experienced vocabulary regression, rather than growth. Sampson's research raises many questions concerning the contributions of basal textbooks to the continued development of children's linguistic awareness. The purpose of this article is to contrast the syntactic complexity of children's language with the syntactic complexity of language

found in basal readers.

Early Language Development

Children learn to speak by acquiring general syntactical patterns from the language of adults, siblings, and peers. They gradually acquire a knowledge of the way words must be ordered to convey meaning. This knowledge is mastered through experimentation and assimilation without any direct teaching. For example, Clark stated that "children begin to reflect on certain properties of language at an early age" (Clark, 1978, p. 18). Furthermore, children make judgments about the form, complexity, and appropriateness of utterances in the language. They also gain an awareness of certain social, functional, and structural properties of language (Grieve, 1983). Empirical studies of language acquisition and development have uncovered significant findings which have become of interest to linguists, psychologists, and educators.

Children's ability to reflect upon language begins to appear about age two (Clark, 1978). During the early stages of language development, children correct their own pronunciations, question the appropriateness of speech styles, play with different linguistic units, and make judgments concerning language usage for varying situations (Clark, 1978). Children exhibit an increasing awareness of language with age and soon become aware of both the form and function of language. Their metacognitive skills become apparent as they progress from the simple to the more complex linguistic structures. Children's language acquisition and cognitive development continue to develop during the early years of school (Clark, 1978).

Reading and Language

Learning to read is a natural extension of learning to speak. Therefore many educators contend that language proficiency is essential if children are to achieve their optimal development in reading. However, during the primary grades, language is filtered through skill activities which result in mechanical reading. The linguistic structure of the reading materials does not match the children's advanced lelvel of language development. Their oral language usage is far more complex than the language of the textbooks used in teaching reading (Corson, 1984).

In a monograph on the relationship of children's oral language to the language in basal readers, Strictland (1962) compared the sentence structure of basal readers to that of the oral language of kindergarten children. Her analysis revealed that there were two kinds of mismatch between the books and the speech samples. The "beginning first-grade basal reading books" were rigid, unnatural, and contained sentence patterns which were not noted in the speech samples of the children. She attributed this mismatch to the fact that the linguistic structures found in textbooks were written patterns instead of spoken patterns.

The appropriateness and readability of basal reader series continue to be an issue. Most beginning reading programs emphasize regularity of grapheme-phoneme correspondence (McKinney, 1983). For example, Hiebert (1983) compared preschool children's chosen words to those words found in basal readers and found that children's self-selected words were more imagery loaded than those found in basal readers. Reid reported that "much of the language of the primer did not reflect the ways in which function or grammatical words, as opposed to content words, play their part in giving a sentence flow, coherence, and sense" (Reid, p. 2). There were adverbial phrases in positions which were unfamiliar to children. In many of the series, the children could not identify whether the speaker was one of the characters in or the author of the story.

Syntactic Complexity and Reading Materials

The importance of syntax can be seen implicitly in

Goodman's (1969) research on children's miscues. Goodman's study revealed that many of the errors that beginning readers make are actually "guesses." Obviously, children attempt to use linguistic knowledge as "cues" to aid in constructing ideas about meaning. Children tend to utilize their syntactical knowledge to guide their comprehension. Consequently, many researchers believe that information concerning the acquisition of syntactical patterns in children's language should be utilized in developing reading materials. Furthermore, these researchers assert that there is an important relationship between children's familiarity with syntactic patterns and their level of comprehension in reading. Morrow (1978) investigated the syntactic complexity of six-, seven-, and eight-year-old children's spoken language using the Botel, Dawkins, and Granowsky formula (1972). She concluded that the syntactic complexity of reading texts should not exceed that of the children's language.

The complexity of language can also be seen in children's creative writings. O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris (1967) studied the oral language of school-age children through an analysis of the writings of kindergarten, first-, second-, third-, fifth-, and seventh-grade students. An increase in syntactic growth was noted between kindergarten and first-grade students and between fifth- and seventh-grade students. They concluded that although all sentence structure patterns could be found at the various grade levels, the frequency of occurrence differed as the children matured. Chomsky's (1972) investigation of the acquisition of linguistic forms revealed that elementary children continue to develop syntactic structure as they progress through the elementary grades.

The possible effects of reading on children's writing were explored by Eckhoff (1983). Reading texts and writing samples of second-grade students were analyzed. In addition, the research included an analysis of style, format, and frequency of occurrence of linguistic structures. Eckhoff found a strong similarity between the writing of children and the syntactic features of their basal reading texts.

Summary and Implications

Research emphasizing the relationship between children's reading instruction and their writing ability is limited. However, inasmuch as reading and writing are language processes, it can be assumed that a relationship does exist.

As the children progress to more difficult levels in the basal reading series, the syntactic structures of their writing tend to change along with that of their basal readers. Therefore, publishers must be constantly aware of young children's language development. Although many publishers may simplify the sentence structures in the basal readers in an effort to facilitate the process of learning to read, this practice tends to result in texts with stylistic features and text formats that are unnatural and uncharacteristic of written English or the language development level of the children (Eckoff, 1983).

Since children enter school with such an elaborate knowledge of language complexity, it would seem appropriate to plan reading instruction to reflect their existing language competencies. Children should be exposed to reading materials which contain familiar patterns of language. Research has revealed that concrete words are more easily learned than abstract words, and nouns are easier to learn than function words (Ollila & Chamberlain, 1979). Consequently, the language-experience approach should be used during initial encounters with reading. This approach to reading instruction would present written language in a more meaningful context, and the syntax of the materials would be analogous to that of the children. As a result, their creative writings would probably contain mor complex sentence patterns, and they would not be limited sytactically by the basal reading texts. Menyuk (1969) suggests that by the age of five, children tend to have an extensive grasp of basic sentence structure. Therefore, children's knowledge of syntax and vocabulary should be utilized to extend their understanding of literacy.

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