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# Language And Reading: A Focus On The Young Child

by Bonnie Smith Schulwitz, Central Michigan University

For many years teachers of young children have intuitively sensed the crucial importance of language development in language arts curricula for young children. With this realization, they have incorporated listening activities, exposure to children's literature, speaking practice, language experience stories, and drama activities into instructional programs. Recent research efforts in the areas of language acquisition, psycholinguistics, and language development reinforce these practices. And, in fact, these research efforts suggest some specific teaching strategies for teachers of young children concerned about helping children grow in language and in reading. The purposes of this article are to 1) re-examine the relationship between language and reading, 2) offer some insights from what we know about language to the reading process, and 3) suggest some practical teaching suggestions for teachers of young children.

## Language and Reading

That language and reading are inter-related has been substantiated by many researchers. Goodman (4) states three primary aspects of this inter-relationship: 1) Reading is language. As one of the four main language arts processes, reading is a receptive process, parallel to listening; 2) Readers are users of language. A reader proceeds from language (of print) to meaningful thought. Reading then is successful to the extent that readers can reconstruct the meaning of print. To do so depends upon the reader's ability to use the language on the printed page; 3) Beginning readers are competent language users. In this statement, Goodman suggests that we should value each child's language

system, regardless of social class or strata, and build each child's existing language competence in teaching reading.

Ruddell's development of the term, "reading-language instruction" reflects what he considers to be an inseparable relationship between children's reading and language development. He explains his rationale for this relationship by stating,

... the emphasis on concept development through experiences in the home and early childhood education curriculum will directly enhance the child's reading and listening comprehension ability. His control and understanding of language will help him validate decoding through meaning in sentence and story contexts. Expressing his life experiences through oral and written language forms will help him develop an understanding of key components of story organization, which in turn will be of value in interpretative aspects of reading.

(6)

There is also research evidence to suggest interrelationships between language abilities and achievement in reading. Loban (5) and more recently Brittain (1) attempted to measure aspects of oral language performance and compare their results with the reading success of these students. Loban conducted an intensive and extended longitudinal study of the language used by children from kindergarten through grade nine. These same children were sampled at regular intervals over a period of seven years. He concluded that those who rank high in general language ability (based on those in his study) are also high in reading ability. Those who are low in general

language ability (low in the study) are also low in reading ability.

Brittain compared scores on Berko's test of morphology with reading achievement scores derived from a standardized measure. The data revealed a positive relationship for both first and second graders in the study.

Although these research results support the general conclusion that greater language sophistication enhances reading ability, we should not link all reading failure to deficient language users, nor should we set out to develop linguistic abilities and expect reading abilities to surge. A definitive cause-effect relationship is simply not yet established inconclusively, if at all. What is suggested is that some relationship does exist and it would appear that oral language ability should influence reading success.

#### Insights from Theories of Language Acquisition

Let's consider for a moment the three basic theories of language acquisition developed to date. (8)

- 1) The Behavioristic Theory - Language is learned externally by imitation. Evidence now exists which challenges this theory. For example: Children do invent words or word forms they have never heard before as in, "The dog runned away." or "He hitted me."

Children's Language can be highly resistant to change as in this sequence of conversation:

Child: "My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we patted them."

Teacher: "Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?"

Child: "Yes."

Teacher: "What did you say she did?"

Child: "She holded the baby rabbits and we patted them."

Teacher: "Did you say she held

them tightly?"

Child: "No, she holded them loosely."

- 2) The Nativistic Theory - Language is determined from within the child (internally) by specific abilities which develop during maturational stages.
- 3) The Cognitive Theory - Language is determined from within the child (internally) via more generalized processes related to thinking or mental abilities. Children learn language through hypotheses and the testing of these to develop their own theory on how language works.

Although these theories have not been expanded to the fullest, we now realize that children do not learn language solely by imitation, thus limiting the effectiveness of behavioristic language development programs. Rather, children draw from their linguistic environment, processing what they hear and think about to discover linguistic regularities and to induce generalizations. What does this theory and research say to teachers of young children?

#### Suggestions for Teachers

- 1) Continue to surround young children with language - *read* to them, *talk with* them, encourage their verbal *interactions*, have them *listen* to language.
- 2) Encourage language development through play. Play is a language facilitator for young children. Greater sophistication in play activities can lead to greater sophistication in language use.
- 3) Based on research such as that conducted by Dorothy Strickland (7), do have children practice language. Children's active involvement in drama, speaking activities, puppetry, and so on, enhances oral language development.
- 4) When interacting with children, Cazden's (2) research suggests that *extending language* is better than

## THE SECOND "R"

by John Auger, Stevens T. Mason Junior High School, Waterford

Students whose reading levels prevent them from fully understanding the ideas and concepts put forth in texts can glean a great deal of this information through listening to classroom lectures and discussions. However, their abilities to express and learn new concepts and ideas need channeling. To this end creative writing can play a major role.

Creative writing serves to affirm the beliefs, ideas, feelings, and concepts gained through classroom discussions and lectures. At the same time it frees those students who have reading difficulties from the frustration of materials and texts with which they are unable to deal. Creative writing can be-

come the backbone of a language-arts/social studies program, a forum for expression, understanding and learning.

Writing like any other skill requires practice, perseverance, and patience. The more time and effort spent in its pursuit the better the end product becomes. What daily exercise and training can do for an athlete may be applied to the student who goes through daily exercise and practice in writing. The mere fact that a daily writing exercise is performed does not guarantee success or perfection; however, it does help to develop and improve performance with the proper teacher guidance.

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expanding it. For example:

Sample expansion:

Child says, "Meat hot."

Teacher says, "Yes, the meat is hot."

Sample extension:

Child says, "Meat hot."

Teacher says, "Yes, it certainly is hot. Do you think you'd better wait till it is cool?"

Cazden found the extending language of the teacher to be more effective in developing the oral language abilities of children.

As teachers of young children, we need to be aware of these insights and devote conscious effort toward accepting the child's own language system. Then, building upon the strengths, we may hopefully pave the way for further success in language and reading.