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USING LANGUAGE TO GAIN INSIGHT INTO LITERACY LEARNING

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A "language story" captures children's interactions with their immediate surroundings--the world about them--in such a way that it reflects how children develop the expectation that oral or written language is meaningful. As teachers of reading and writing we can use children's language stories as a tool to gain insights into processes related to literacy learning. Take, for example, Amy's story.

As a preschooler, Amy enjoyed reading the signs along the road and the eye-catching advertisements displayed by the supermarkets and gasoline stations. She would also read the labels of familiar home products. Once she discovered that the label related directly to the content, she became an avid reader of labels and excitedly explained that now she would not need to squeeze a tube, spill a bottle, or open a box to discover what was inside--she would merely read the label and know!

One hot, sunny afternoon Amy went swimming with her family at the local beach. She was accompanied by her nine-year old cousin, Clint and her grandparents. The grandparents feared that Amy's light skin would be harmed by the sun and had brought along a bottle of sun-screen. Amy reached for the bottle of "stuff" and proceeded to read the label, "Sun...in a bottle?...Clint, what's this word?" Clint answered, "Sun screen".

Upon hearing the answer to her reading dilemma, Amy began to cry in panic. She cried loudly; she signaled extreme distress. However, she could not communicate clearly what had caused her distress. Her grandparents were alarmed but totally unable to penetrate the reason for her distress. Although they tried to comfort and reassure Amy, they could not alleviate her panic.

Amy's cousin, however, sensed that her distress was the outcome of what she had read on the label. He picked up the bottle and said, "Is it the bottle that scares you?" Amy gulped a scream and nodded her head. Her cousin read the label aloud, "Sun screen--are you afraid of this?" Amy nodded "Yes" while struggling to suppress her sobs. Clint

looked hard at the label and suddenly smiled triumphantly. "Amy, it's the screen, isn't it? You think we're going to put a screen around you...you're afraid of being penned up in a metal screen!"

Amy stopped swallowing sobs, the tears ceased to flow. Her eyes crinkled and she smiled back at her cousin. He hastened to pour some of the creamy liquid on his hand and rubbed it on his face and chest, "See, it's just a lotion; it will prevent burning--it screens out the rays of the sun, but it's not a metal screen." Amy giggled and between sighs said, "A screen that's not a screen--a screen that's a lotion. How silly!"

Amy had had a natural reading experience. According to Piaget (1968), Amy was at the pre-operational cognitive level, ages 2-5, in which she related objects one to another through language. Each of Piaget's stages represents the way in which the person actively constructs knowledge of the world around him or her.

A person's expectations, schemata or idea of how things should fit together or what should occur, are based on the past learning experiences of the individual. Neisser (1976) stated that "because we can see only what we know how to look for; it is these schemata (together with the information actually available) that determines what will be perceived" (p. 20). It is an individual's conceptualization of the world that determines meaning in reading.

Amy's present cognitive map led her to expect that the container contained what the label read. The can with the label "soup" had soup in it. The box with the label "rice" had rice in it, and so on.

The first hint that all was not as it should have been with Amy's perception was when she read "sun" and responded "Sun in a bottle?" The response indicated Amy's pre-operational cognition level. It centered on one variable at a time and on one perception of that variable. To understand her fear, it became necessary to understand that after reading the word "screen" Amy also expected a metal screen in the bottle.

What does Amy's language story tell us?

This vignette exemplifies the role of prediction in reading. Amy predicted from what she knew about the world

and 'guessed' what would be in the bottle. She thought that "Sun Screen" was the real thing--a metal screen. But it would also be a barrier, between herself and a lot of things because screens limit freedom of movement. According to Smith (1982) "...this ability to predict is both pervasive and profound, because it is the basis of our comprehension of the world (p. 60).

Amy's predictions, based on past experience, came from a theory of the world that was in her head. Her predictions led her to perceive the world as she expected to perceive it. Thus, her understanding of the world as it unfolded for her was continually affected by what she already knew.

Prediction is necessary in life so that obstacles can be dealt with before they can become hindrances. Amy's screams came before the perceived metal screen was erected. Her screams and tears were her attempt to prevent the perceived loss of freedom.

Prediction also helps to eliminate irrelevant possibilities. For example, Amy would have realized that "Sun Screen" definitely was not a "car" or a "house". Smith defines prediction as "...the prior elimination of unlikely alternatives" (p. 62). In order to predict, the reader must form a mental image of the expected meaning. The occurrence of imagery during reading has been demonstrated in recent brain research (Kraft et al., 1980). Imagery is based on the cognitive map in each individual's mind.

Teachers need to tap into children's imagery to assess what is being perceived during reading. In order to monitor children's cognitive maps, teachers must encourage children to become active, verbal participants in the classroom.

Listen to children

Language stories from children can be a key that teachers can use to cue into children's background in language and into their cognitive map of language. A 'language story' occurs when a child demonstrates an expectation that oral or written language makes personal sense. Amy's personal sense of based on her perception of how oral and written language functioned in the total world.

Amy's story is an example of Clay's (1967 & '72) assertion that children display meaning-oriented strategies very early. Young children who exhibit behavior similar to Amy's

have a 'literacy set' for reading. "They begin to operate immediately and automatically in appropriate ways whenever they are faced with print" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 61).

By what process do children recognize the majority of words so early? In what context have they learned some of the words previously? The evidence suggests that children learn to read through a natural, developmental mode (Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966). Children today have access to meaningful reading, in books, on signs, on food cans and cereal boxes, on T.V., etc. Durkin (1966) and Clark (1976) found that early reading children tend to read 'spontaneously' and show a great deal of interest in print found around them.

Amy's early reading behavior showed that she knew the meaning of reading and was using reading to obtain meaning. Holdaway (1979) would state that reading had a "deep" meaning for Amy. Further, Amy had shown knowledge of the conventions of print: a label on the bottle relates to what is in the bottle. Amy's emotional response to her perception of the meaning of the print showed that when reading, young children do not just parrot the surface verbal recall level.

A number of children enter school knowing how to read without having been formally taught. Teachers can use this naturally developed knowledge of children as a spring board for further literacy development. From the "mouths of babes" teachers can gain invaluable cues to each child's level of language background and reading development.

Thus, as teachers guide the children's reading development, they can create bridges from the children's internal cognitive maps to the external meaning of print.

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