

4-1-1984

## Children's Linguistic Insight: What We Think We Know

Camille Blachowicz  
*National College of Education, Evanston, Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Education Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Blachowicz, C. (1984). Children's Linguistic Insight: What We Think We Know. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 24 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol24/iss3/10](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol24/iss3/10)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).

# CHILDREN'S LINGUISTIC INSIGHT: WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW

*Camille Blachowicz*

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

Our first goal in this paper is to deal with the title. Why "linguistic insight" rather than the more common "linguistic awareness" or "metalinguistic awareness?" And why the subtitle, "What we think we know?" A second goal will be to highlight some of the research in this area which speaks to the teacher of reading.

The first issue, a definition, rises out of the varying ways in which the terms "linguistic awareness" and "metalinguistic awareness" have been used. One of the first appearances of these terms was in a brilliant collection of studies called Language By Ear and By Eye (Mattingly, 1972). Viewing speaking and listening as primary linguistic activities, Mattingly described reading and writing as "parasitic" on these primary functions, requiring linguistic awareness which he regarded as a specially developed metalinguistic consciousness of certain aspects of speech and literacy. In the flow of time and research, metalinguistic awareness has become more commonly used to refer to the ability to think about language and to talk about it or to consciously act upon it as if language were an object to be considered.

Learning a new language in a formal way is a good example of a metalinguistic activity for adults. When we think in terms of the right case, of adding the correct thing, or choosing an appropriate article so we can buy an airmail stamp to send home our postcards from "far away places with strange names," we are engaging in a metalinguistic exercise. Compare that activity with the more spontaneous use of one's native language or a bilingual activity learned in an immersion program. Adults whose first language is other than English, or those who were raised in a home where another language was used by the parents to communicate about those matters they did not want the children to understand, are often surprised and shocked when they understand phrases or recall words they didn't know they knew. Such performance is not the result of conscious formulation as is formal language learning. This distinction between "knowing something" and "knowing that you know" is often the one made between linguistic and metalinguistic awareness.

In children, such a distinction is often evident in speech performance. The child who says "I goed home" demonstrates a tacit awareness of the function of the -ed marker for tense. This type

of linguistic insight is much different from being able to comment about usage. When asked why they use "goed," which is a form not heard or reinforced at home, young children frequently appear evasive and uncomfortable. They might say, "Because it is 'goed', that's why, silly!" Or they'll vaguely refer to it as the way one says the word.

A more sophisticated stage of linguistic insight is an ability to detect what "sounds funny." This ability to detect error may occur before and/or after performance clearly demonstrates any awareness of some regularity. For example, a child who corrects one's pronunciation of "Louella," which the adult might say as "Woo-ew-wa," in mimicry of the young speaker, may say, "No, it's not 'Woo-ew-wa;' it's 'Woo-ew-wa!'" This would be similar to the child who finally begins to reject, "I goed" as "sounding funny."

The ability to reflect on language abstractly to discern a rule is a most highly developed level of this insight. Saying "I say 'goed' because -ed means it happened before," would be an example of such insight, a statement that has been rarely, if ever, uttered by a small child who says "goed." Noting, "That must be a long 'a' because there's a silent 'e' on the end," is another such example of a difficult or abstract response to language. Yet this is the level on which children are often asked to work at very early stages of reading acquisition. Being tricky and sometimes devious, students are often able to master the statements about the language without having the true insights, or conversely, to be unable to explicate the tacit insights they do have. This creates what teachers call a problem of "transfer." In actuality, failure to transfer is often an indicator of rote memorization rather than internalized learning.

A third observation, concerning both the definition of what linguistic/metalinguistic awareness might be and how it develops in children, is the nature of the tasks used by researchers to investigate children's capabilities. Different cognitive operations may be tapped by one study and not another. A good example is sound segmentation requiring analysis (breaking cat in /c/ /a/ /t/) as opposed to synthesis (blending those sounds). Research in phoneme perception often asks the child to isolate out sounds (analysis) while others ask for blending (synthesis) as modes of response. Yet both types of task are used to draw conclusions about phoneme perception and manipulation. Further complicating the research is the fact that different researchers use different sizes of units (phrases, words, syllables, phonemes) in contexts ranging from meaningful to meaningless. Lastly, the differences in processing demands are apparent, some studies calling for recognition, some for recall as well as a variety of other tasks. All of these task demands interact, making it quite difficult to equate and compare studies.

Be that as it may, there are a few lines of research which seem suggestive for the teaching of reading. The remainder of this paper will attempt to highlight these areas. Because of the definitional confusion, this paper will adopt the term "linguistic insight," coined by Ehri (1979) in a superb summative article

to which the interested reader is referred for a more exhaustive review of research titles.

Research on Linguistic Insight.

Teachers generally assume that children who are fluent in the use of language present at least appropriate cognitive receptors for beginning reading. However, Reid's (1966) research with Scottish five-year olds emphasized that they lacked any specific expectancies of what the purpose of reading might be or what the process might be like. They also exhibited what Downing called "cognitive confusion," calling letters 'numbers' and confusing both these and other terms with 'words' and 'names.' When children were asked point blank, what reading is (Groff, 1976) some answered, 'making sounds,' 'breathing,' 'moving your mouth,' and other non-meaning involved definitions. Many cross-cultural replications and related studies (Clay, 1972; Lundberg and Torneus, 1978; Rapan-dropolou and Sinclair, 1974) suggest that children do begin the educational process in this state of confusion. Teachers must not assume a shared vocabulary with their students and should establish it prior to or during reading instruction which is so structured as to develop these awarenesses. LEA or experience charts are examples of techniques which develop a common vocabulary.

Other lines of research involve the activities we ask children to perform when we teach sight recognition and sound/symbol correspondences. A body of evidence has accumulated depicting children as not able to easily isolate a word in either the spoken speech stream or in the printed sentence (Holden & MacGinitie, 1972). Karpova (1955), one of the first to examine the child's ability to segment sentences into words, found several stages in this segmentation process. At first, the division was made semantically, not lexically. For example, for the sentence

Jim and Jake went for a walk.

a 4 year old might identify two "words"

Jim went walking/ and/ Jake went walking.

An older, more linguistically insightful child would make the division on a subject-predicate basis, calling the two "words"

(Jim and Jake) /// (went for a walk)

Finally a slowly developing word-consciousness would evolve for more 'wordlike' segmentation but, frequently, the function words (of, and, for) would be omitted or tied to words for which they served some function. Such results are substantiated by other researchers (Ehri, 1975; Holden & MacGinitie, 1972) who structured tasks related to matching words heard with processes of tapping, laying down markers or filling in slots. Although these tasks are not equivalent and are being scrutinized (Lundberg, 1978) to try and reconcile inconsistencies of results, it does seem that the ability to auditorially separate words is not a natural capability at school entrance.

Similarly, the visual characteristics of words are not immediately evident to beginning readers. Children are not able to match a spoken word with one that would be of appropriate word length even when the distinction is as simple as long (@@@@@@@@) versus

short ())) (Rozin, Bressman, Taft, 1974). Further, word space boundaries are not obvious markers for children (Downing, 1970B; Meltzer & Herse, 1969). Thus, a teacher using a word-based program or an LEA approach that requires matching the language heard with the language read should not expect boundaries of words to be salient to all beginning readers.

With respect to the teaching of sound/symbol correspondences, the interword segmentation ability on which such instruction is predicated is apparently a highly analytic and abstract act for young children. Even though young children can discriminate minimal pairs ('bat' versus 'cat') they may not be able to analyze or isolate sounds in words. This seems sensible in light of psycho-acoustic research which reveals that, in actuality, there are no acoustic boundaries separating phonemes in speech. Although 'bat' has three phonic correspondences, it only has one acoustic segment which is the size of the syllable (Liberman & Shakweiller, 1977; Limberman, et al, 1974). Indeed, many studies (Smith and Spoehr, 1973; Gibson, 1971) suggest that the syllable is the smallest unit for which sound analysis is desirable. Combined with the research on the difficulty of both analytic and synthetic phonic-like tasks, this work on phoneme perceptions suggest that syllabary and invented spelling programs may be optimal for the initial reading programs (Gleitman and Rozin, 1973; Chomsky, 1977; Read, 1971).

Though this research suggests ways in which we might re-evaluate our preconceptions about children's abilities at the beginning of reading, the experimental tasks have been called into question, as was noted earlier. Such dissatisfaction has led to the design of naturalistic, more ecologically valid methods of assessing and developing children's readiness to read.

Clay's SAND test (1978) presents a child with a book and asks the child to do a series of tasks to reveal both tacit and explicit insights about books, language, print, meaning and language manipulation. The SAND test presents a model for assessment which is prescriptive rather than predictive, that is, it can tell you what needs to be taught/developed, not just who may do poorly in beginning reading.

Another technique for both assessment and teaching (Morris, 1978) involves auditory memorization of a familiar children's rhyme or jingle which is then used with its written correlate to assess the child's awareness of directionality, word boundaries and more sophisticated word, letter and sound variables. The task is prescriptive of the child's level of competence as well as being highly correlated with standardized readiness predictive measures (Morris—in press). How, then, can we summarize what this complex and burgeoning field of research as to say to the classroom teacher? First of all, it cautions us not to assume a shared vocabulary with our students. Such simple and frequently used terms as 'word' 'letter' and 'sentence' may be unknown to them. Secondly, a child's, indeed an adult's, linguistic performance is not identical with his ability to reflect on and to analyze language. Knowing and "knowing that you know" are not the same

thing. Even the student who can parrot a rule or use a grammatical construction may be unable to explicate or manipulate linguistic structures.

Further, with respect to sound/symbol correspondences, analytic and synthetic tasks required by phonics training programs could be beyond the capability of many kindergartens and first grades. Programs relying on syllabaries or invented spellings are being proposed as sensible alternatives. Lest the LEA practitioner feel smug, research also cautions us that speech and writing are not the same nor are the correspondences between them obvious to the beginning reader.

Finally, the development of more ecologically valid and sensitive techniques can help us both test and teach in a classroom setting. Such field-based methods can help us to become more insightful about children's use of and knowledge about language at the same time as we develop their awareness. Such teaching and research tools may give us 'cleaner' data on children's linguistic insights so that a future paper of this type might be entitled—

"Children's Linguistic Insight: What We Know We Know"

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chomsky, C. "Approaching reading through invented spelling." In L.B. Resnick and P. A. Weaver (Eds.), Theory and practice of early reading. Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Assoc., 1977.
- Clay, M. M. Reading: the patterning of complex behaviour. Auckland, Heineman Educational Books, 1972.
- Concepts about print test (the 'Sand' test). Auckland, Heineman Educational Books, 1978.
- Downing, J. "The development of linguistic concepts in children's thinking." Research in the Teaching of English, 1970, 4, 5-19.
- Ehri, L. C. "Word consciousness in readers and prereaders." Journal of Educational Psychology, 1975, 67, 204-212.
- "Linguistic insight: threshold of reading acquisition." in T.G. Waller & G.E. MacKinnon Reading Research: advances in theory and practice, v. 1. NY: Academic Press, 1979.
- Gibson, E.J. "Perceptual learning and the theory of word perception" Cognitive Psychology, 1971, 2, 351-368.
- Gleitman, L.R. and Rozin, P. "Teaching reading by use of a syllabary." Reading Research Quarterly, 1973, 8, 447-483.
- Holden, M.H. and MacGinitie, W.H. "Children's conceptions of word boundaries in speech and print." Journal of Educational Psychology. 1972, 63, 551-557.
- Karpova, S.N. "Osonznanie slovesnogo sostava rechi revenkom doshkol'nog vozrasta." Voprosy Psikhologii, 1955, 4, 43-55. (For an abstract in English, D.I. Slobin, "Abstract of Soviet studies of child language." In F. Smith and G.D. A. Miller (Eds.), The genesis of language. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

- Liberman, I.Y. and Shankweiler, D. "Speech, the alphabet and teaching to read." In L.B. Resnick & P.A. Weaver (Eds.), Theory and practice of early reading. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Association, 1977.
- Liberman, I.Y., Shankweiler, D., Fischer, F.W., & Carter, B. "Explicit phonemes and syllable segmentation in the young child." Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 1974, 18, 201-212.
- Lundberg, I.V. "Aspects of linguistic awareness related to reading" In A. Sinclair, R.J. Jarvella, and W.J.M. Levelt (Eds.), The Child's conception of language. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1978.
- Lundberg, I., & Thorneus, M. "Nonreaders' awareness of the basic relationship between spoken and written words." (1977)
- Mattingly, I.G. "Reading: the linguistic process and linguistic awareness." In J. F. Kavanah, I. G. Mattingly (Eds.), Language by ear and by eye: the relationships between speech and reading. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972.
- Meltzer, N. S. and Herse, R. "The boundaries of written words as seen by first graders." Journal of Reading Behavior, 1969, 1, p. 3
- Morris, D. The Beginning Concept of Word and its Relationship to Phoneme Segmentation Ability. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1980.
- "Beginning readers' concept of word." In J. Beers and E.H. Henderson (Eds.), Developmental and cognitive aspects of learning to spell. Newark, DE: IRA, in press.
- Papandropoulou, I., and Sinclair, H. "What is a word? Experimental study of children's ideas on grammar." Human Development, 1974, 17, 241-248.
- Read, C. "Pre-school children's knowledge of English phonology." Harvard Educational Review, 1971, 41, 1-34.
- Reid, J.F. "Learning to think about reading." Educational Research 1966, 9, 52-62.
- Rozin, P., Bresseman, B., and Taft, M. "Do children understand the basic relationship between speech and writing? The Mow-motorcycle test." Journal of Reading Behavior, 1974, 6, 327-334.
- Spoehr, K.T. and Smith, E.E. "The role of syllables in perceptual processing." Cognitive Psychology, 1973, 5, 71-89.