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Don Richgels
University of Wisconsin, Madison

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH: A TRANSITION FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Don Richgels
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

A child's speaking ability is a valuable resource for the beginning reading teacher. Research findings about children's language acquisition have lent support to theories of language, such as Chomsky's (1959) criticism of Skinner's (1957) behaviorist explanation of language; it might be supposed that those findings would play a similar supporting role for theories about the learning of reading, a language-related activity. In fact, the language research most relevant to reading educators is that which highlights the differences between oral and written language. An exception is research about a late-developing aspect of language competence called metalinguistic ability, the mature speaker's ability to reflect upon language.

A language experience approach to the teaching of beginning reading makes use of the valuable resource of children's speaking ability. But more importantly, it also cultivates metalinguistic ability and eases the child's transition between two very different forms of language, utterance and text.

1. Theories of Language Development and Applications to Reading

A recurring discovery of research in the development of language production is the regular, systematic, and often universal nature of that development. Examples include the systematic evolution of word meaning (E. Clark, 1973; and Nelson, 1974); the universal importance of word order (Slobin, 1971; and Braine, 1976); and the regular order of appearance of sounds (Jakobson, 1971; and Foss and Hakes, 1978), forms of negation (Bellugi, 1967), forms of the interrogative (Bellugi, 1965), inflections (Gleason, 1958), obligatory syntactic features (Brown, 1973), and transformations (Menyuk, 1969). Considering that a behaviorist theory of language cannot account for all such regularities (Wardhaugh, 1971) nor for the limited role of expansion and imitation in language learning (Brown and Bellugi, 1964; and Cazden, 1965), other explanations must be sought. The two main alternatives are the nativist and cognitive theories of language acquisition.

Nativist Theory

Chomsky (1967, 1968, 1972, 1980) has delineated a theory of an innate facility for language learning, or universal grammar. Rosemont (1974) emphasizes the language-specificity of the innate mental structure that Chomsky hypothesizes. McNeill's (1970) concept of an innate language acquisition device (LAD) is consistent

with Chomsky's theory. Giordano (1979) outlines support for the innateness hypothesis, especially for language ability being discrete from other, later—developing forms of abstract ideation. He goes on to describe an approach to reading readiness instruction that would make use of the same inherited aptitudes that promote oral language learning.

Cognitive Theory

A cognitive explanation of language acquisition emphasizes biologically determined mental abilities, but sees no need to characterize any such abilities as language-specific. Several observations point to a relationship between speech development and the development of general cognitive ability. For example, McNeill (1970) accounts for holophrases (one—word utterances) as their being the left-overs when parts of sentence-like concepts are lost before production, and Menyuk (1969) explains observed development in children's sentence structure in terms of growth in memory capacity.

Besides memory and control of specific production processes, other general cognitive abilities come into play, such as those that characterize Piaget's stages of development. Foss and Hakes (1978) point out that the child's understanding of object permanence surely contributes to the onset of one-word utterances and that the change from the sensory motor to the preoperational stage seems to parallel the transition to utterances longer than one word, in which words must function as parts of wholes. Flavell (1977) argues for the existence of cognitive, rather than linguistic, universals. He says that children use the same strategies to interpret both non-linguistic events and langugage. Slobin (1966, 1970, 1973), among linguists, makes the strongest claim that general cognitive and mental development is the critial determinant of language acquisition. Contributing factors are growing ability to deal with the world, increasing short- and long-term memory ability, and strengthening information processing ability (Slobin, 1966).

The disagreement between the nativists and the cognitive theorists is not nearly as fundamental as their common differences with behaviorists. In many cases it reflects a difference in emphasis and in choice of data. It seems that there may be linguistic and cognitive universals. The former restrict the forms into which human languages may evolve and the child's innate acquaintance with them directs—makes most efficient—his or her application of the latter to the task of learning language.

Direct Application to Reading

Two explanations of the reading process emphasize the parallels between oral and written language, their common dependence upon syntactic and semantic constraints. Goodman (1967 and 1973) calls reading a psycholinguistic guessing game with graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic clues. By sampling, predicting, testing, and confirming, the reader determines the writer's message with minimal dependence upon graphemes. F. Smith's (1971) description of the reading process in terms of reduction of uncertainty is similar. The amount of dependence upon visible features varies

with the amount of syntactic and semantic information that is available. Studies of children's oral reading errors, even in the first grade (Weber, 1970), reveal a grammatical awareness of preceding text, which lends support to such theories of reading.

Examples of efforts to coordinate the reading and language-processing abilities of children include comparisons of the language in reading texts and the oral language of children. In 1962, Strickland found that the former was more advanced than the latter, and that reading texts seemed to lack a scheme for controlling introduction of sentence structures. Ruddell (1974) tested fourth graders' comprehension of texts written with common and uncommon syntactic patterns, using cloze tests. He found better comprehension of high frequency syntactic patterns. Shuy (1969) called for a new system of language arts instruction, emphasizing self-instruction, stressing the innate ability of students, and using texts that reflect children's oral language.

Bougere (1969) attemped to identify oral language predictors of beginning reading success, but failed to find significant results for most of her hypotheses.

It seems from this review of language research and efforts to apply it to reading, that little has emerged that has direct, practical value for the reading teacher. Two additional areas of research, however, do have important implications for the design of a program of beginning reading instruction. One is research about children's metalinguistic ability; the other is research about differences between oral and written language.

II. Metalinguistic Ability and Reading

Metalinguistic ability is the mature speaker's ability to reflect upon language. It is evidenced by linguistic intuitions, the speaker's capacity to make judgments about such properties of utterances as grammaticality, synonymity, and ambiguity. Another aspect of such ability may be knowledge of such concepts as "letter", "word", and "sentence" (cf., Downing, 1973, in regard to "cognitive clarity" about such concepts, as a prerequisite to learning to read). This may be one aspect of language competence that overlaps with reading ability. It is acquired at roughly the same age that formal reading instruction begins.

Mattingly (1972) makes the distinction between a language-based skill, e.g., Pig Latin or reading, and primary linguistic activity, e.g., speaking and listening. He maintains that reading depends upon linguistic awareness, and that—unlike during speaking and listening—that awareness is never inaccessible during reading. Nurss (1980) reviews literature about linguistic awareness and reading and cites C. Chomsky's report, at a 1979 conference on the subject, that before third grade, children are unable to focus simultaneously on syntactic structure and meaning. She has asked grade-school children to make grammaticality judgments. Hakes, Evan, and Turner (1976) report that before age six, children's grammaticality judgments are based on content—what is asserted—rather than on form. McGhee (1974) reports that not until age six or seven do children understand puns, riddles, and other "linguistic" jokes.

Still, an obvious question remains: whether linguistic aware-
ness—coinciding as it does with formal reading instruction—is
a product of or a prerequisite to that instruction. Nurss (1980)
concludes that at least word consciousness is a product. Foss
and Hakes (1978) point out that linguistic intuitions may reflect
the child's transition from preoperational to concrete operational
thought, but they also point out that this step has only begun
at age five, when reading instruction is taking place in many
of our schools. They question the assumption that the child's
knowledge of spoken language is great enough that it does not
present any problems with learning to read. For example, children
at age five and six usually do not know what phonological units
are and so can not know what graphemes are meant to correspond
to. They cite Weinschenck (1965) that even German children, learn-
ing to read a language with a more regular phoneme-grapheme
correspondence than English, have difficulty learning to read.

III. Differences Between Oral and Written Language

Carroll (1966) points out some important differences between
learning to speak and learning to read. Reading is taught, while
speech is acquired informally; reading is broken down into compon-
ents of the task and abstracted, while speech is experienced in
its full complexity and remains situational; reading is taught
before writing, while listening and speech develop in a parallel
fashion; reading may be taught as a subordinate coding skill,
while speaking is always functional and meaningful to the child.

D. Olson (1977) describes fundamental differences between
utterance and text, traceable to their being different means to
different goals, not optional routes to the same goal. He argues
against the presumptions that knowledge is not altered when it
is transformed into statements and especially that statements
are not altered when they are written down. Written language was
invented to serve science and philosophy and their vision of real-
ity, with an emphasis on true conditions, explicitness, and con-
ventionalized language forms. The functions and structures of
language were altered to meet the demands of autonomous text,
a process that began at least as long ago as Luther's time. When
children first experience text, they encounter almost a foreign
tongue. Their previous experience is with utterance, a form of
language that serves social needs and in which meaning is nego-
tiable.

Schallert, Kleiman, and Rubin (1977) also analyze differences
between oral and written language. Speakers tailor their messages
with specific listeners in mind, and they receive feedback from
the listeners. They use less complicated syntax and less diverse
vocabulary than writers. And they use intonation for prosadic
cues. Thus readers may require more comprehensive knowledge
schemata than listeners, greater knowledge of syntax and vocabulary
and greater skill at taking another's perspective.

Rosemont (1974) maintains that language that is transferred
to a non-speech medium is no longer natural language.

Tatham (1970) tested second and fourth graders' reading
comprehension with two different tests, one that used frequent

oral language patterns and one that used infrequent oral language patterns. A significant number of children did better with the test that used frequent oral language patterns, and the difference in results on the two tests was greater for second graders than for fourth graders. Tatham concluded that the second graders may lack the ability to relate oral language competence to written language.

Although the point of these findings seems to be that written language is not as simple a matter as "speech written down," they highlight the value of an approach to reading instruction whose first step is reading as "speech written down."

IV. The Language Experience Approach to
Beginning Reading Instruction

The conclusion to be drawn from the above reviews of research about metalinguistic ability and differences between oral and written language is that the most effective program for beginning reading instruction would do two things: (1) foster children's "cognitive clarity" about such concepts as "letter", "word", and "sentence" and how those elements look in written language; and (2) retain characteristics of utterance while introducing children to text. The language experience approach, which uses transcripts of the students' own speech as the primary material for teaching reading, is such a program.

The usefulness of such concepts as "letter", "word", and "sentence"—which are of marginal value to speakers—becomes immediately apparent as the child's speech is transcribed during story dictation. And with a language experience approach, the use of conventionalized language forms associated with text is postponed, while the informal nature and social function of language use, with which the child is familiar from his/her experience with utterance, is maintained. The language experience approach is well suited to the needs of the beginning reading teacher who wishes to overcome children's "cognitive confusion" and avoid introducing them to reading as a foreign tongue.

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