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FACTS AND FICTION ABOUT LANGUAGE 'SKILLS'

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A quick glance through most curriculum guides and some textbooks will give the distinct impression that the language arts are composed of a set of "skills" (Otto & Chester, 1976). More implicit is the assumption that if these "skills" are mastered, then the art of language will have been achieved. And while some may not want to surrender this notion, the way out of the dilemma is not clear. What are "skills"? What purpose do they serve? Which are the language arts "skills"? What is the theoretical and research-based evidence on "skills"?

This article addresses the above questions, in order to determine what is fact and what is fiction about language "skills."

What are "skills"?

There are lists after lists
Of skill after skill.
To confuse any mind
Or make it most ill.
They have to be useful—
How could they be wrong?
For I read them all day
And half the night long.
If a kid ever masters
These skills I have read
He'll be either a robot,
Or else he'll be dead.

Roberts (1974, 75)

Teachers typically use the word "skills" in a generic sense: they speak about study skills, vocabulary skills, writing skills, spelling skills, sequence of skills, and so on. Naturally these terms are not referring to "skills" in the psychological sense (i.e., chains of motor responses). It is more reasonable to assume that what teachers intend when talking about "skills" is "lesson objectives," "teaching focus," or "competencies" (Artley, 1980).

A teaching focus or teaching objective can be simply defined as the purpose for which a teaching activity is initiated. Therefore, a teaching objective might be that students are able to make an outline for an essay, or that they can divide words into syllables, or that they can spell a given number of words correctly. Each of these teaching foci includes a number of skills in the sense described in the following paragraph.

The Purpose of Lists

Whether lists contain skills, processes, strategies, or conventions, they are useful for instructional purposes; however, they also reflect our conception of what constitutes language art. The position taken here is that a focus on the core skills is the most fruitful since they are also the most transferable to all modalities. Mosenthal (1976-77, p. 87), for example, concluded that "a common linguistic competence underlies both silent reading and oral-language processing (listening)," and Danks and Pezdek (1980, p.33) interpret Mosenthal's findings to extend to oral reading as well. Henry (1974, 4) talking about reading as concept development, states that "the strategies inherent in either analysis or synthesis are always the same, from first grade through graduate school." A study by Kellogg (1976) compared first graders receiving reading readiness instruction and those receiving a science inquiry unit on word meaning, listening, matching, alphabet, numbers and copying (i.e., Metropolitan Readiness Test). After the six-week treatments the "inquiry" students outperformed the other group in all but the copying test. Kellogg (1976, 62) concluded that "To learn to read, the child must first have developed some ability in the reasoning process." The observations by Henry and Kellogg support the conceptualizing and language notion of Sticht which was presented earlier.

The contention here is that the same reasons used to support "skills lists" are even more appropriate to core skills as defined here. A list of core skills quickly identifies one's view of language whether it be transformational-generative, schema-theory based, whole-language oriented or some other point of viewing. In addition such a list helps to show how listening, speaking reading and writing draw on similar underlying abilities. This should be useful for teaching purposes since it allows one to use a strong area to work on a weak one. Such a list also helps to determine the scope of what is to be taught and to diagnose who knows what. Hierarchies and sequence should be based on Piagetian notions of development (see Petrosky, 1980, for example). Certainly a list such as suggested in Figure 1 would help to focus instruction and it could form the basis of more realistic language evaluation.

Which are the language art skills?

The intent here is not to present a list of skills but rather to discuss some of the attributes and characteristics of core language skills with the connotation used in this article.

Through task analysis or feature analysis it becomes possible to determine which core skills are involved in a teaching task or which are related to a specific objective. A few examples are given in Figure 3 to indicate which core skills could be related to certain teaching foci. Naturally, which core skills are involved depends on the context of the activity and to some extent the knowledge of the learner (i.e., recall often eliminate the need for analysis).

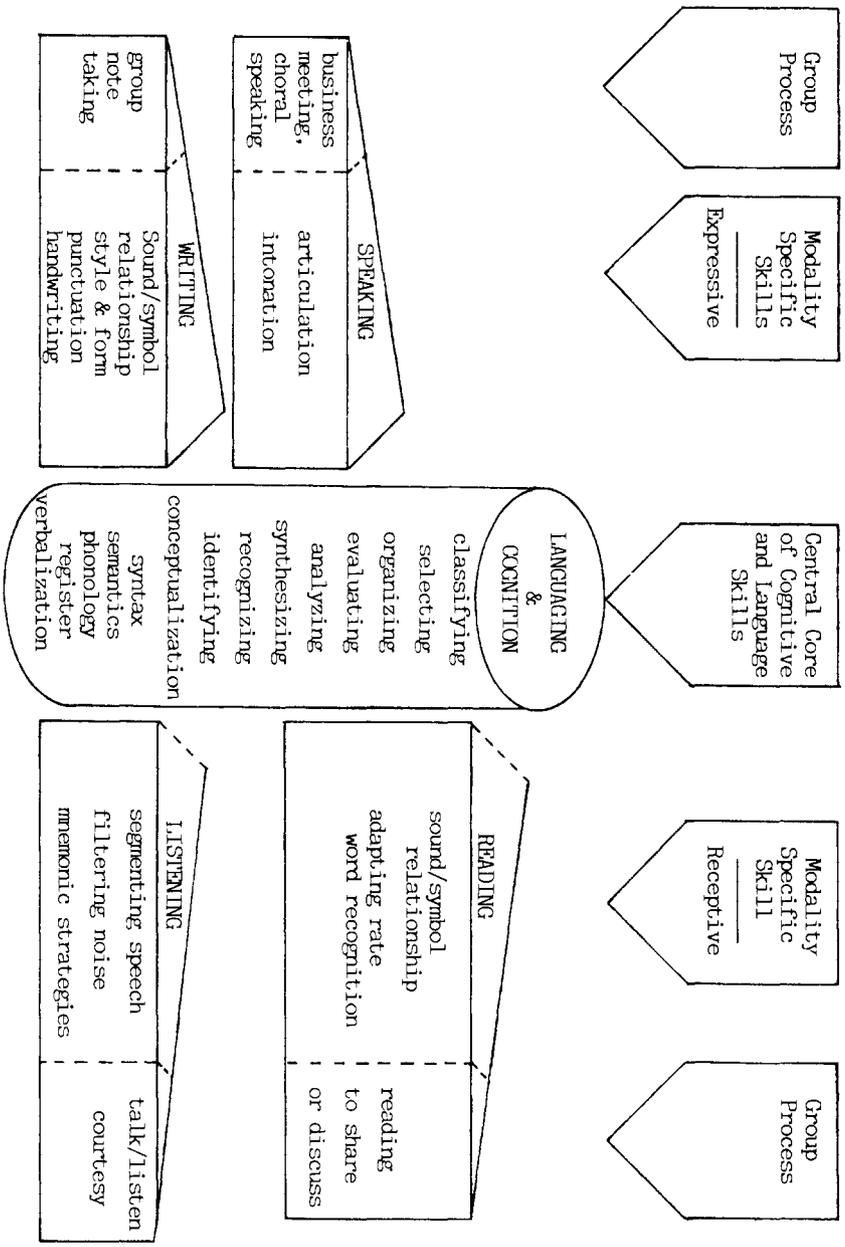


Figure 1 - Interrelationship of cognitive, language, modality specific and group processes

If the word skill is to become more meaningful, I propose that it be used to describe the core processes required for communication purposes. These purposes could be classified into cognitive skills such as classifying, identifying, and selecting, and linguaging skills such as identifying a sound-symbol relationship, using a particular register, and determining the syntactic category of a word. Sticht (1974,19) expresses the distinction between cognitive and linguaging skills in the following way: "The child must first acquire a conceptual base and some skill in conceptualizing, and then he must acquire a system of signs and rules for sequencing these signs (i.e., a language) for communicating his conceptualizations to others."

A few examples should help to clarify the distinction between a skill and a teaching focus as proposed here.

EXAMPLE 1: The child comes across the statement "citrus fruit is grown..." and cannot pronounce the underlined word. The teaching focus might be "initial consonant substitution," but the skills required might be "comparing, identifying, synthesizing, applying." These skills naturally could be used for other, quite different teaching purposes as well.

EXAMPLE 2: The student is asked to find the main idea of the story "Goldilocks." Again the skills involved would include "analysis, classification, and synthesis." The teaching focus is finding "main ideas."

The attempt to differentiate the teaching focus and the more transferable skills is not new. Morrison (1979, 35) states that the Wisconsin Design staff "has been devising a way to help teachers teach not just a specific story but instead teach the student to comprehend better everything he reads. The key to teaching this transferability...is to teach skills, the tools of reading comprehension... The staff has concluded that reading comprehension skills can be categorized as follows: word meaning, sentence meaning, passage meaning, and sequencing." Unfortunately the word "skill" is subsequently used in a variety of different ways by Morrison and by Otto (1977). It is also rather obvious that the "skills" are not solely "reading comprehension skills" but rather comprehension skills common to all the language arts.

A diagram will assist in clarifying this last observation. Figure 1 shows the central core of skills referred to as linguaging and cognitive skills. These core skills are useful in reading, listening, speaking, and writing, and should be transferable. When a skill does not transfer it is very likely that some modality specific skill is involved. For example, the spelling and pronunciation of a word require both core skills (identification, analysis, etc.) and modality specific skills. There are more options when moving from sound to symbol than when going from symbol to sound (see also Read, 1980).

Often group processes and teaching strategies are listed along with other language arts "skills" as well. These are mostly conventions rather than skills in the sense used here and their

relationship to core skills and modality specific skills is shown in Figure 2.

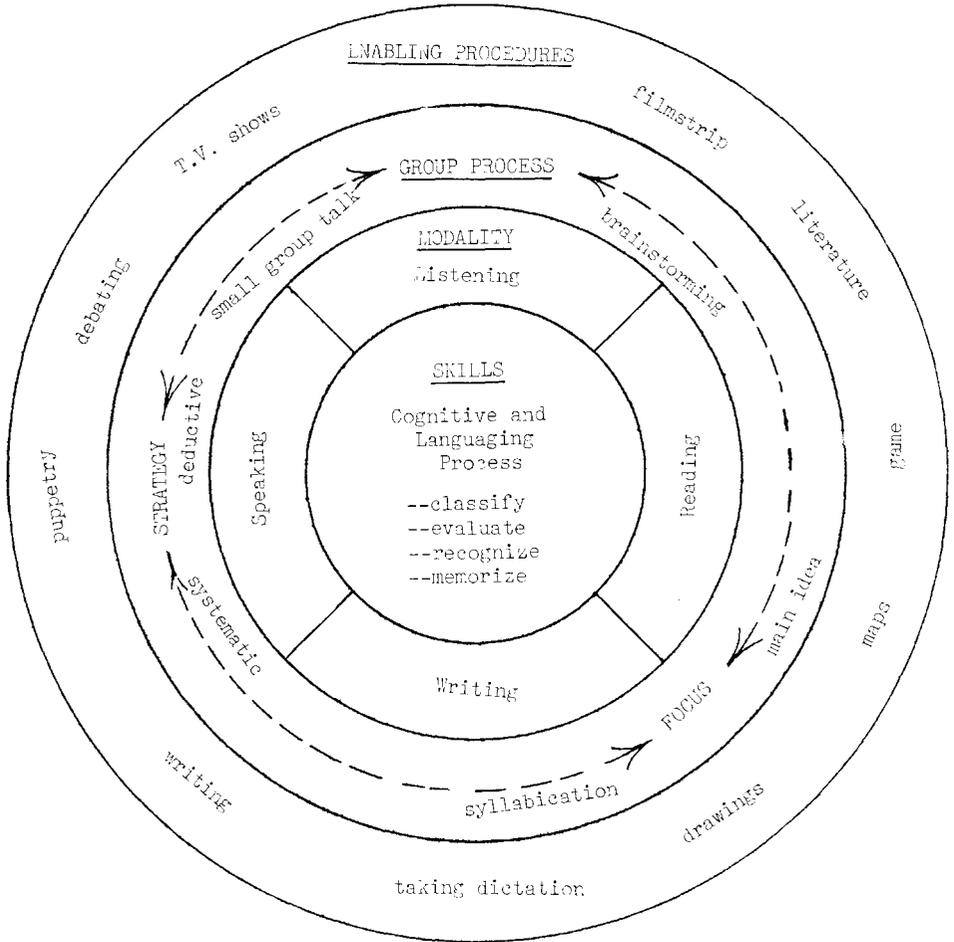


Figure 3 Feature analysis of some common teaching foci.

Teaching Focus	<u>Core Skill</u>				
	recognize	identify	classify	analyze	synthesize
blending		X			X
suggest title	X		X		X
write news story		X		X	
identify tense		X		X	

Gerhart (1975) has presented a wealth of information on how to use "categorization" to develop writing and reading skills and Henry (1979) has applied it to the teaching of literature.

In addition, the task must be developmentally suited to the age of the student as suggested by Petrosky (1980). McConaughy (1980) has extended the developmental notion to the field of literature.

A further consideration is the effect that the conceptualization in Figure 1 can have on integrating the language arts. Rather than teaching the same "skills" separately through the reading modality and through the listening modality (since the lists are very similar—see Lundsteen, 1979, for example), much time can be saved by teaching them simultaneously since the underlying skills are identical. An awareness of modality specific skills will assist the teacher in assuring that the implicit intuitive leap is made by the student when (s)he is expected to make it.

What is the research base for language skills?

Several years ago a colleague and I were working on a language arts textbook and we devised a "Language Skills List" (Braun and Froese, 1977, 273-276) based on the available information. Then, as now, empirical evidence was meager and the bulk of the consensus was based on a variety of curriculum guides.

Very little research has been directed at identifying the language arts skills to be taught at the various age or grade levels. A few exemplary studies, however, are available.

In the area of reading some empirical evidence has accumulated towards defining skills (Quelly, 1969; Rankin & Overholser, 1969; Davis, 1968; Jones, 1970) and in attempting to validate skills hierarchies (Bourque, 1980).

The work of Hanna, Hanna, Hodges and Rudolf (1966) has given us some insights into what should be taught in Spelling. O'Hare (1973) may be credited for giving a new direction to the improvement of writing through sentence-combining. The work of Keunnapas and Janson (1969) and Lewis and Lewis (1964) when combined can

lead to insights into what makes handwritten letters most distinguishable. Spearitt's (1962) work in determining the components of listening comprehension different from reading comprehension is an important advancement. The results of Tough's (1977) initial study and subsequent work could also give some new direction to oral language in the school by helping us to focus on the uses of language as well as on the syntactic or lexical aspects.

The above sources are only examples of the empirical work on what should constitute the components of a language arts curriculum, but an examination of current language arts textbooks will uncover little else of a substantial nature based on research findings. Often the lists presented are tautological or based on other equally unsound compilations.

Summary

I have tried to present a practical system of differentiating skills and teaching objectives such that the underlying common components of the language arts will become more readily identifiable. A quick glance at Figure 1 will review this notion.

Second, I have pointed out the usefulness of skills and objectives as they were defined earlier.

Third, the interrelationship of skills, modalities, teaching procedures, and enabling procedures was clarified in Figure 2.

Finally, a brief list of research-based studies of language arts components was presented to show the meager basis on which our language arts programs rest. Perhaps we need to take this paucity of information as a warning to us to initiate research intended to answer the outstanding questions or else as Emerson said: Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet.

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