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HELP THEM TO SPEAK, WRITE, AND LISTEN—THEY'LL BE BETTER READERS

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While observing beginning readers in both American and British schools, I have noted that the better readers also appear to be the better speakers, while the child having difficulty with reading also tends to be less verbal and less explicit in oral language activities. This observation sparked my interest in the role of oral language in the reading process.

The merging of common interests among psycholinguists, developmental psychologists, and reading specialists has resulted in a recognition of the related-nature of all language arts, and a special interest in the role of oral language in the reading process. These concerns are particularly relevant for the teacher of elementary reading, for if current research findings and theoretical trends are correct, proficiency in oral language influences the child's success in reading activities. This should become a major component of reading readiness and beginning reading instruction. The following discussion will consider the role of oral language in reading and implications for the classroom teacher.

Oral Language, Reading, and Thinking

The relationship of oral language to reading becomes apparent if the two language abilities are viewed in relation to cognitive development, and if reading is understood as a thinking process involving reconstructing meaning from print.

Children develop cognitively as their perceptions of the world add to or change the interrelationships among the cognitive categories they have already constructed in their minds. Language plays a vital role in this process. Language directs the child's

attention, influencing perceptions, and aiding in organizing relationships among cognitive categories as new information adds to or modifies existing cognitive structures.

Use of language allows for the exploration of thoughts and ideas. It allows the child to consider possible consequences of actions not yet performed, and it allows the child to reason with more detail about any matter to which he/she attends. Verbalizing permits the child to use speech creatively to fit the unique characteristics of the situation. It helps define the elements involved in the particular situation and it makes clear the relationships among these elements.

Oral language plays an especially important role in cognitive development and in learning to read. It aids in the organization of cognitive structures and in the acquisition of a background of knowledge, and it is these cognitive structures and this background of knowledge that the child brings to the printed page as reading begins. Oral language also functions as a link between the new, the print, and the familiar, the concept. One cannot grasp a concept unless one can relate at least some part of that concept to a framework already in the cognitive structure. One must be able to relate the new to some part of the old. The child who is trying to read "pitcher", for example, must already have in his/her cognitive structure the concept of a liquid carrying vessel. Therefore, the task before the reader is to relate those black marks that spell "pictcher" to the already acquired concept of pitcher. This is where oral language serves a vital function, that of linking the new, the print, to the old, the already acquired concept. Without a linkage, reading would not be possible.

A growing body of research supports this relationship between verbal fluency and reading ability. As early as 1935 Hildreth studied the process of vocabulary acquisition of a five-year-old boy, and concluded that among the easiest words for the child to learn to read were those most often heard in his informal speech. Hughes (1951) studied the interrelationships among eight language arts; reading, spelling word meaning, language usage, capitalization, punctuation, sentence sense, and paragraph organization. Each of these language abilities, the findings showed, is related in a positive way to the other language abilities independent of intelligence.

Loban's (1963) longitudinal study of language development revealed that those students who were

superior in oral language ability in kindergarten and grade one were also superior in reading and writing at grade six. He also found that differences between students in the high and low Language Proficiency Groups were consistent for all language features in the study, which included reading ability, writing ability, scores on listening tests, and range of vocabulary. Ruddell (1965) and Tatham (1970) found that the greater the similarity between the child's oral language patterns and the language patterns used in the reading material, the greater the ability to comprehend written text.

Immersion in language appears to be an important factor in reading success. These language experiences, however, extend beyond the classroom to include the home. Hence, Bernstein introduced the concepts of "elaborated" and "restricted" codes, and has frequently stressed the advantages for students who enter school with language fluency born of the use of an elaborated code. Milner (1951) also considered the influence of the home and found that in the homes of children scoring highest on the language measure, mothers routinely ate breakfast with their children, during which there was a two-way conversation between mother and child. At the evening meal, there was general conversation among all family members, and adult contributions to verbal interactions also brought about more mature speech patterns.

Proficiency in use and comprehension of language results from active participation in a variety of language experiences. There are similarities among all of the language arts. And it appears that the greater the proficiency in oral expression, the greater the ease and success in learning to read.

The psycholinguistic explanation for the above emphasizes the role of prediction or anticipation. The greater one's fluency, the more accurately one can predict or anticipate the syntactic structures and vocabulary that will be encountered in speech or print, and thus the greater the ease in comprehending. Because of this relationship, and the influence which scope of oral language exerts on development in written language, there is an obvious need to incorporate a wide variety of language experiences into the reading program. Some suggestions follow:

Language Activities

1. Children need to hear adult speech. The teacher should talk about what she is doing, describing, explaining, and even posing questions about the actions in which she is engaged. Children should be encouraged

to join in the conversation. One should not "talk at" or "talk to" children, but rather "talk with" them.

2. Children, especially those who are shy, enjoy talking to or through puppets. The teacher or a student may assume the role of the puppet, or become the companion, if two puppets are used. Students may want to pretend they are characters from a recently read story, or they may wish to act out a contrived situation. Many alternatives exist.

3. Place a few objects behind a small screen on a desk, table, or the floor, and have two students sit on either side of the screen. The student on the side with the objects is to describe one of the objects so that the other student can guess what the object is, in three tries.

4. Language experience stories, in which the child's exact words are transcribed, provide excellent opportunities to practice all four modes of language use. The student is delighted to see his own words in print and greatly enjoys reading his own work. Students will want to share their stories with others. Stories may be collected and put into books. Because these stories are transcribed, even the child who is not yet able to participate in a creative writing activity can become an author.

5. Creative writing offers an opportunity for even the beginning reader to participate in a written language activity. Excellent stories have been written by children who have just begun to read. They are proud to identify their work, which should be displayed throughout the classroom. A positive and enthusiastic attitude must guide the teacher's reactions to student stories, despite grammatical and spelling differences. Insisting upon spelling and grammatical perfection would only defeat the purpose, which is to gain proficiency in all forms of language.

In addition to the above, choral reading, show-and-tell, group discussions, and dramatizations of stories and plays should be enthusiastically and routinely incorporated into the reading program. They provide excellent opportunities for students to listen to and verbalize among their peers.

Sources for Language Activities

1. Field trips are excellent sources for language experiences.

2. Strange-looking, unfamiliar objects brought into the classroom will undoubtedly elicit questions, conversations, and stories.

3. Children need "hands-on" objects of all sizes, shapes, and textures, such as: building blocks, sand table, typewriter, clay, balls, pieces of material of various textures, tools, animals, plastic plates and utensils, rope, string, etc. Teachers can encourage both oral and written descriptions about the objects' origins and uses.

4. An interest center filled with old clothes and costumes is an excellent means of promoting language experiences. Children may wish to act out an impromptu play or imagine they are famous people, and verbalize freely. Older students can be encouraged to write a play.

Students bring a wealth of cognitive and linguistic abilities to school. These should be recognized and incorporated into the reading program. To become proficient readers, children need to be actively involved in a variety of language experiences in all the forms --speaking, writing, listening, and reading. The role of the teacher must be that of facilitator in making the classroom environment serve these objectives. In this way, what the students say and do will comprise the reading-language program, becoming the basis for the acquisition of all four language skill forms.

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