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We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Kenneth S. Goodman, Editor

The Psycholinguistic Nature of the Reading Process

Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1968. Pp. 343.

Developments and research in linguistics and related fields have provided the background of knowledge and rationale from which new insights and new emphases in the teaching of language processes are emerging. Learning in this area appears to be exceedingly complex, much more so than teaching methods of the past several decades reflect. Presently, scholars from various disciplines are engaging in empirical and theoretical investigations into the relationships between children's developmental patterns of language and cognitive learnings. In one conference, called for consideration of this increasing body of new knowledge, a well-known linguist points out some of the dangers of designing new teaching strategies when he states:

. . . the major impact that linguistics has had upon schools in the past is to sweep through them with one fad after another, causing no end of confusion and havoc. . . . Most of the research that we see measures the effects of these rules over a very short time span . . . before we can look at the applications of any such technique, we have to have the research programs that see what happens over the years. . . .¹

From a symposium at Wayne State University, presentations of research and theoretical schema by linguists, psychologists, and educators interested in a psycholinguistic approach to the teaching of reading, have been published in a volume entitled *The Psycholinguistic Nature of the Reading Process*.

In the opening paper of the book the editor states that to understand the extremely complex psycholinguistic process the language and systems of language that make communication possible must be understood. He believes that no theory of reading, reading learning, or reading instruction can be successful if it excludes any aspect of this process. He also draws some interesting, sharp distinctions between *recoding* processes, by which a reader reconstitutes oral language from graphic sequences and patterns, and *decoding* processes, by which a

1. William Labov, *The Reading Process*, pp. 95 and 96. Bethesda, Maryland: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1968.

reader derives meaning from the recoded graphic input. Further, he maintains that, "Reading is not reading unless there is some degree of comprehension and therefore at all stages of instruction there must be concern for ultimate decoding of written language."

The next four presentations deal with perceptual aspects of reading. Kolers reports experiments to gain insights into these aspects and, in particular, the way readers organize their perceptions. He suggests reconsideration of present beliefs and practices in reading instruction based upon misconceptions of visual perception in reading. Jones writes that, despite the fact that modern reading instruction seems to be built around "the word," the word and the sentence are not really the units through which spoken language is perceived. More research is needed to determine the natural, perceptual units of spoken language, the relationship of these units to written language, and just what psychological principles are involved in the transfer. Hansen and Rodgers define psycholinguistics as a study of ways in which the features of language, the immediate stimulus situation, and the child's behaviorial history control can effect the child's perception and assimilation of written materials. Their study concerns computer research undertaken in a quest for better ways to construct and sequence beginning reading curriculums. Carterette and Jones report studies designed to discover how patterns of perceptions arise and to test possible relationships between the new work in structural linguistics and language behavior of children and adults.

Experiments set up to explain the disparity between advanced language development in children and their cognitive development are described by Anisfield. Inferences from his research suggest that present recognition procedures used to measure competence may place obstacles in the way of a child's performance, interfering with his manifestation of competence, or might be recognized as tapping different aspects of competence.

After a careful, linguistic study of spelling-to-sound relationships, Weir and Venezky conclude that teaching of reading based upon these relationships is only as good as its base. They imply that such relationships are more consistent, and more complex, than they have been thought to be. They suggest that the morphemic and syntactic patterns already a part of a child's language habits be put to use in design of reading materials.

An instrument for syntactical analysis of children's compositions, described in detail by Everetts, and a study to help discover how grammatical structure affects comprehension difficulty, reported here by

Bormuth, may help teachers in ranking readabilities of written materials and in the selection and pacing of reading materials to children's language competencies.

Ruddell deals with an attempt to gain insights into related factors in early reading instruction and in language variables of children. Data collected in the first year of the study are inconclusive; adequate evaluation is dependent upon continuing longitudinal studies in realistic classroom settings.

It is likely that the reader's interest will be piqued by Olsen's examination of the validity of statements made by publishers and producers of materials for teaching beginning reading which, it is claimed, are based on linguistics, linguistic knowledge, or linguistic method. His conclusions indicate that there is a need for better integration and utilization of linguistic knowledge in reading instruction, that this area needs more well-documented research, and that classroom practitioners need more help in understanding linguistics and the application of linguistic principles.

Classroom teachers and other professional workers with children in the language arts areas who are committed to the human aspect of *means* as well as *ends* will appreciate the final presentation by LeFevre. Here, he makes a strong case for a multidisciplinary approach to language and to reading, which he sees not as ends in themselves, "but communicative means to personal and social maturity, to the ultimate ends of education and of humanity itself, in fact."