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A Look At Linguistic Readers

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Abstract

Linguistics, as it relates to reading, has generated much interest lately among educators. Although linguistics is not a new science, its recent focus has captured the interest of the reading specialist because both the specialist and the linguist are concerned with language.

A LOOK AT LINGUISTIC READERS

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Linguistics, as it relates to reading, has generated much interest lately among educators. Although linguistics is not a new science, its recent focus has captured the interest of the reading specialist because both the specialist and the linguist are concerned with language.

This surge of interest in linguistics becomes evident when one sees that a total of forty-four articles on linguistics are listed in the Education Index for July, 1965 to June, 1966. The number of articles on linguistics written for educational journals has been increasing ever since.

This interest has been sharpened to some degree by the publication of Chall's book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1). Her finding that the code-emphasis approach yields better results in beginning reading stages has bolstered the cause of linguists and many school systems have begun to use linguistic readers for reading instruction.

How can linguistics be related to the teaching of reading? Linguistics is the study of the structure of the English language and its study enables the pupil to discover how spoken language is set down in writing. The printed symbols (words) are viewed as a code and, according to the linguist, breaking the code involves analyzing the basic speech patterns of our language.

In a linguistic approach, most words presented in reading are phonemically regular and fit a particular pattern. The assumption is that once the underlying system is discovered, it is easier to break the code. Thus the pupil spends the initial learning period on the smallest letters and learns first how to combine consonants and vowels into almost infinite numbers of three and four letter words.

In order for children to perceive the phoneme-grapheme (sound-sight) relationship, the linguistic approach emphasizes the teaching of the letters of the alphabet as a beginning procedure. Since consonant sounds are not pronounced in isolation in normal English, the linguistic tool of presenting minimal pairs (words which differ only in one consonant or vowel) is used. Thus, a word such as *fat* can be easily contrasted with words such as *cat* and *sat*. Irregular words which do not follow a pattern are introduced as sight words.

Since the initial emphasis is on the decoding process, illustrations which usually accompany story text are often omitted in beginning

reading materials. Some linguists feel that illustrations are too distracting to the decoder. Once this process has been mastered, pictures are used and concentration is now placed on the improvement of understanding.

Some confusion has existed concerning the relationship of phonics to linguistics. Although both terms have been used interchangeably at times, the linguist is quick to point out the basic difference. According to the linguist, phonics instruction involves having youngsters learn rules in isolation which they cannot always apply when asked to figure out unknown words. This is avoided with the linguistics approach since the youngster, from his study of phonemically regular patterns, discovers underlying language structures in a systematic manner.

Then, too, the problem of phonic blending is also avoided since the decoder becomes aware of the sound represented by a letter as he analyzes the difference between two similar words. Letters are not sounded in isolation and then blended to make a word.

Basal readers, because they employ the look-say or whole word method, have been criticized by linguists. Their chief criticisms center around the fact that the whole word method emphasizes meaning immediately and often lacks the needed interrelationship between writing and speech. Linguistic reading materials have not, however, proven superior to the conventional basal reader. Sheldon and Lashinger (6) conducted a study with 465 first-grade children in 21 classes which evaluated the effects of a basal reader program, a modified linguistic approach, and a linguistic approach. Comparison of pre-and post-test scores revealed that no one of the three approaches was more effective in teaching beginning reading.

In recent years several book companies have published linguistic readers. Some of the popular series currently in use are: the Merrill Linguistic readers, (2) the Lippincott Basic readers, (3) the S.R.A. Linguistic readers, (4) the Miami Linguistic readers, (5) and the Harper & Row Linguistic readers (7). What are some of the similarities and differences between these readers and typical basal readers? A descriptive analysis of some of the salient features of each series is presented in Table I.

Analysis of Table I reveals that with the possible exception of the Lippincott Basic Reading Series (which more nearly resembles the typical basal reader), the skills development rationale has many similarities. The Merrill Linguistic readers use no illustrations to accompany story text whereas all the others do. The greatest weak-

TABLE I
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF FIVE LINGUISTIC READERS

Name of Series	Skills Development Rationale	Illustrations and Content	Materials Used	Evaluation
Basic Reading Series (Lippincott)	Introduces short vowel sounds, then selected initial consonant sounds (not involving clusters), then demonstrates how letters are brought together by presenting words in lists, and then in stories. Irregular words are introduced by sight method.	Attractive cartoon-like illustrations in color. Multi-ethnic content employing both realistic and fanciful stories.	1 Preprimer 6 Readers Accompanying workbooks Phonics Guide	Tests for skills mastery in teacher's manual.
Linguistic Readers (Merrill)	Emphasis on the perception of minimum contrasts in words which fit regular spelling patterns i.e. mat-fat, mat-met, etc. Words introduced in the first four readers belong to the first major set of spelling patterns: consonant-letter(s)-vowel-letter-consonant letter(s).	No illustrations. Content consists of short sections dealing in large proportion with animals.	My Alphabet Book Six readers and accompanying workbooks.	Informal testing techniques suggested.
Miami Linguistic Readers (D. C. Heath)	Presentation of sound-symbol correspondences introduced in spelling patterns rather than in terms of individual letter-sound correspondences. Language-oriented with a usage of natural speech patterns and attention to aural-oral control.	Black and white cartoon-like illustrations. Stories have varied themes. Many animal stories typifying problems in moralistic fashion. Content cross-cultural.	2 Big Books Readiness Book 15 Level Books 5 Plateau Levels Accompanying seatwork booklets.	Informal testing techniques suggested.
Basic Reading Series (S. R. A.)	Skills development follows consonant-vowel-consonant pattern representing one-to-one correspondence between a letter and a sound. Exceptional words introduced by sight method.	Multi-ethnic illustrations (not corresponding to text at beginning levels). Content varied.	Alphabet Book Alphabet Wall Chart Alphabet Flash Cards Word Pattern Charts Six Readers Accompanying Workbooks	Eight especially developed tests and a manual for their use included.
The Linguistic Readers (Harper & Row)	Vocabulary including letters which represent speech units in a patterned and consistent way are introduced in a controlled manner. Words including unpatterned speech units introduced by sight method.	Attractive multi-ethnic illustrations. Content varied and appealing.	Readiness Workbook 3 Preprimers 4 Readers Accompanying Workbooks	Informal testing techniques suggested.

ness in all the linguistic readers seems to be a lack of provision for evaluation of those reading skills which have been mastered by the pupil and those which have not. Other than informal techniques suggested in the teachers' manuals, a systematic program of evaluation (an extremely important part of any reading program) is not included.

Although not as extensive as those found in the different basal reading series, there are several special features contained in these linguistic reader programs as well as supplementary materials available for both teachers and pupils. The Lippincott series has a fairly extensive section dealing with suggestions for enrichment, a good bibliography for use of audio-visual aids as well as a list of collections of related stories and poems. The Miami Linguistic readers also contain in the teachers' manuals suggestions for enrichment and many suggestions for the development of language readiness skills inasmuch as these readers were originally developed to teach reading to bilingual children enrolled in the Dade County schools in Florida. The Harper & Row Linguistic Readers publish a supplementary device called "Word-Go-Round" which is a word wheel to teach word analysis skills through linguistic principles. The S.R.A. series is accompanied by the BRS Satellites which is a boxed set of supplementary reading selections.

Concluding Remarks

The biggest difference between the linguistic readers and the traditional basal reader series is in the area of skills development rationale. Whereas linguistic readers employ the use of minimum contrast and consistent patterns in developing a sense of regular sound-symbol relationships, initial vocabulary used in most basal reader systems is usually based on frequency of use rather than strictly syntactic and morphological considerations. These methodological considerations result in story content which is quite different. Here the reader will wonder if "The fat cat sat on the mat" is more appealing than "Oh, look. See baby run."

The teachers' manuals which accompany linguistic readers, for the most part, are not nearly as comprehensive as those which accompany most basic reader series. Fewer teaching suggestions are offered in the manuals of linguistic readers for enrichment and follow-up activities. Suggestions and ideas for developing comprehension skills are sketchy in the linguistic manuals, as are evaluative techniques for reading skills mastery.

Teachers and administrators must consider these factors when

selecting materials for reading instruction. Although the limited research which is now available does not substantiate the claim that the use of linguistic materials will yield the best results, the linguist offers some valuable information to the teachers of reading—specifically in the areas of phonology, dialectal influences and the acquisition of language.

We need to study how the existing instructional dichotomy in reading during the beginning stages can be modified. We also need to consider linguistics in its broad view and not to construe it as merely a decoding process. If greater stress is given to linguistic principles during the beginning stages of reading instruction, it might be feasible to retain some of the plausible techniques, supplementary materials and devices suggested in basal reading programs. An eclectic approach in the hands of an enthusiastic and linguistically-oriented teacher can prove invaluable in developing competent readers.

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