    Language differences peculiar to the disadvantaged are discussed as they
relate to reading. Linguistic differences, including the interdependence among
language, operant feedback, thought, and experience, and the power of these to
reconstruct and reassociate through reading constitute one barrier. Another is the
effects of language on the total adjustment of the individual and the problems
involved in trying to place him in a classroom. The language experience approach is
described as perhaps the best way to bring together the student's experiences,
language, thought, feedback, and reading. Role playing and other activities growing
out of the language experience approach bring together the world of the student
and the world of the classroom. References are included. (MD)

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LANGUAGE BARRIERS OF THE CULTURALLY DIFFERENT

Who are the culturally different or disadvantaged? Why
is their education a special problem, and in particular, how
are their differences in communication with the middle class
culture related to methods for their instruction in reading?

Like any broad generalization or group statistic, the
term "culturally disadvantaged" does not really describe for
me the real Ruth or Sarah or Leviticus or any other of the
junior high school pupils whom I teach in one of Columbia's
poverty areas. They each have their own separate needs, drives
and interests as surely as do students from affluent homes. The
category "disadvantaged" is no more specifically meaningful for
detailed selection of methods and materials for a given lesson
than is the term "affluent". I still must test and teach,
evaluate and experiment, and build in painstaking stages a
profile of Ruth's or Sarah's behavior that is related to learn-
ing to read. What the general category tells me is that certain
characteristics are more likely to be present with these pupils
than with another selected population; but which of these
characteristics are actually present or whether even, if present,
they can be considered an educational disadvantage must be
determined individually.

One of the general characteristics common to many of the
culturally different are the significant linguistic differences
between their speech patterns and the standard English of the

middle class. Surely language represents the humanizing element that makes true intimacy between one another possible, but because this is so, language differences have a way of separating and alienating as well as the opposite. Therefore, I should like to develop the next few remarks around the general topics of language, the culturally different, and reading, attempting to suggest the rationale that language being what it is, language patterns may act as a significant restriction to reading achievement unless certain basic principles about the language-reading relationship are considered during reading instruction.

Because much that has been said about language or speech comes from the linguists, I shall borrow from them rather heavily in the next few statements. According to Lefevre, "Language forms a network, a continuous webbing indissolubly linking inner man, his thoughts and emotions with other events, actions, sanctions, social groups and institutions." He continues his discourse about language as an interactive process by suggesting that "thought at higher levels is inconceivable without a prior development of both the audio-lingual and manual-visual systems of language."[1]

Alexander Johnson in a Treatise on Language indicates the interdependence between the words of language, experience, and reading. "Words", he says, "can refer us to sensible information which we have experienced; but they cannot reveal to us

what we have not experienced."[2] Reading, he continues, is the mental process of reconstructing the experiences behind language.

Vera John and Leo Goldstein, writing on the social context of language acquisition, describes how a child of the middle class acquires a spoken language through feedback and correction of his own active speech. The culturally disadvantaged, on the other hand, learns his language by receptive exposure, without the operant control of feedback. Language, to him, will have little use as a mediator in interpersonal behavior.[3] This restriction through passive exposure without feedback is also pertinent to the culturally disadvantaged and their world of experience. Without guided perception of the things which he has experienced, or verbal manipulation of ideas about his experience, very little in terms of a significant body of meanings or concepts can be accumulated.[4]

Piaget would disagree with the idea that language and thought can be explained by one another. Thought, according to piaget, derives from the abstraction of one's own action upon things; language is an imitation of patterns provided by adults. However, Piaget does suggest that the relationship is one of a tool or handmaiden, rather than that one is the master of the other. "Language facilitates the expansion of thought and adds to its mobility."[5] From a practical point of view, there is some significance in this difference. If language is

deceptive in relation to thought, then "teachers of middle
class children (may be) often misled by the verbal facility of
(their) youngsters into believing that they understand more
than they actually comprehend." And on the other hand, "the
teachers of the (culturally different) are often fooled by the
language handicaps of these children into thinking that they are
much more (thought handicapped) than they actually are."[6] This
point of view expresses once again the individual dynamics at
work, whatever the general classification of the student.

The preceding comments from language specialists have
indicated the interdependence between language, operant feed-
back, thought, and experience, and the power of these functions
to reconstruct and reassociate through reading. It is directly
in line with these functions that the culturally different person
may also be educationally disadvantaged as he is confronted by
the world of the middle class. What is this language like?
While this question is an exceedingly technical one, differing
from group to group, some fairly general observations may be
pertinent. First of all, just because a person speaks with a
dialect or accent does not mean that the difference is educa-
tionally handicapping. The syntactical and grammatical level
of the person's native language or dialect may be used as a
present potential for language facility in the adopted culture,
for the rules under which the native language operates transfers

from one mode to another with relatively little difficulty.
For a person who has not developed a complex syntactical or
grammatical fluency in his first language, little transfer can
take place, and attempts to educate through the second language
will find difficulty.

There are other facets of a language difference that are
more than the linguistic; they are the far reaching effects in
the total adjustment of the individual, maintaining a wall of
separation between him and the world into which he is thrust.
How does the culturally different relate to the middle class
world of Dick and Jane and all the other characters of the
middle class Anglo-Saxon story books? To begin with, he has
had few experiences with toys, pictures, books, or magazines
and few if any of the other common denominators of middle class
life. Very little spoken language has passed between him and
his parents. He possesses strong negative feelings concerning
his personal worth and devalues himself as a student. He has
moved from school to school and from failure to failure. He
has not learned to communicate, especially with the middle
class, developing instead fears and suspicions of their way
of life. Which cues he responds to, how he will respond, and
what his responses will be are learned reactions from a totally
different environment than the school offers. These differences
are seen as points of exclusion between him and the middle class.

This whole process of exclusion, based in significant part
on linguistic separation, helps to set a self-concept that
has a higher correlation to achievement than do so-called
measurements of intelligence.[7] This self-concept is based on
at least two factors: the expectations one's society and peers
have for him and the kinds of behavior patterns which the in-
dividual himself selects as a "style of life," which helps
determine what he will see and hear, think and say, remember
and forget. "Any value which is inconsistent with the in-
dividual's valuation of himself cannot be assimilated; it meets
with resistance and is likely, unless a general reorganization
occurs, to be rejected."[8]

The typical classroom, whose power structure is geared to
middle class speech patterns, likely places this linguistically
different student with a style of life quite different from
theirs in a special grouping with the stated purpose of more
adequately attending to his needs. Studies by both Meyerowitz
(1968) and Goffman indicate that special placement, instead of
helping a pupil adjust, actually hinders him. Putting such a
pupil in a "slow" or otherwise labeled class probably con-
tributes significantly to his feelings of inferiority and likely
creates lowered expectations on the part of the teacher also.
Lloyd Dunn of George Peabody College for Teachers contends that
much of such grouping simply creates labels rather than helping

to emphasize a daily positive formulation of teaching and learn-
ing methods immediately relevant to the student. Added to this
physical exclusion are too often found intolerance, rigidity,
strict discipline, and even physical force meted out by the
teacher. One of the major problems that we have already pointed
out is that the student does not come with a built-in feeling
of relatedness to the classroom, and surely these actions do
nothing to lessen his feelings of rejection. Sol Tax, speaking
at the 1968 Claremont Reading Conference on this topic, stated
that the reading and writing of the classroom must reflect the
identity of the learner, and to the extent that they do not
they are discarded. He discussed the interesting history of
the Cherokees of Georgia as an illustration of this point. Be-
cause I am not elsewhere familiar with this history, I will para-
phrase it from Sol Tax. The Cherokees became literate within
three years after Sequoia invented written symbols for their
language in the early 1800's. They introduced their own print-
ing presses and evolved a literate culture. They were then
forceably moved to Oklahoma where they built seminaries, teach-
ing Greek and Latin for the first time in any school west of the
Mississippi. In 1900, Oklahoma became a state and the Indians
were forced to learn by the white man's methods. Today, the
Cherokees are the poorest and the least educated Indians in
Oklahoma.[9] Many other selections from the literature indicate

the importance of using the learner's language. Walter Loban,
writing for Elementary English, stresses that the language the
child brings should be fostered as a means of thinking, ex-
ploring, and imagining, helping the student to develop and
amplify his own language to the full range of his linguistic
potential.[10] James Flemming, writing for the Reading Teacher
in October, 1968, also emphasizes the point that reading in-
struction should not be a test of a match in pronunciation be-
tween the student and teacher, but that differences in pronuncia-
tion, even substitutions of words, should be seen as differing
from mistakes in reading. To understand if the student has
made a correct transliteration between the print of the book
and his own linguistic system, the teacher will need to under-
stand the student's language, including his grammar and homonyms.
Mark Weiss, a graduate student at the University of South Carolina,
is presently involved with a research study in an attempt to
teach teachers the language of particular dialectic groups of
students. His technique is to tape-record and video-tape the
language of children from particular dialect groupings in both
play and classroom activities. After a linguist has evaluated
and interpreted the tapes, he will use them as a basis for teacher
in-service training workshops. The workshops will include not
only intensive and directed listening on the part of teachers,
but they will be expected to be able,to use the dialect with at

least a passing acquaintance themselves. The question should
be raised, and indeed the literature in general seems to suggest
that the teacher's role is finally to help bring about a second
language for the language different student. But in this the
teacher must act as a model, not as a speech corrector. While
the literature suggests that a move toward a second language
must start fairly early in the elementary grades before sensi-
tivity to new sounds is lost, Lefevre states that "if a dialect
change is to be effected, it must be done finally on the initia-
tive of the child himself."[11]

Assuming the ideal that the teacher has learned the language
of the student, the teacher must have yet another change of heart
or practice from the typical classroom. According to Ned Flanders,
the teacher habitually dominates the interactive opportunities
of the classroom by his own speech. Percentagewise it is some-
thing like this: about 66 per cent of the time of the class
is directed to talking, about 66 per cent of this talk is done
by the teacher, and about 66 per cent of the teacher's talk is
directive. If the student is to learn how to interact and to
communicate within the classroom, this ratio is going to have
to change. Carlton and Moore at the Illinois State University
have published an interesting study in which they attempted this
change through a self-directive dramatization of stories. Self-
directive dramatization refers to the pupil's original, imagina-

tive, spontaneous interpretation of a character of his own
choosing in a story which he selects and reads cooperatively
with other pupils in a group which is formed only for the time
being and for a particular story. Because self-selection of
stories is involved, many books on many levels and varieties
are made available at all times in the classroom. Comparisons
of classes after the experimental period indicated significant
changes in both self-concept and reading behavior in favor of
the experimental groups over the traditionally taught basal
reader groups. In fact, the dramatization groups indicated
more than a year's growth in reading in three and a half
months.[12]

Perhaps there is no better way to bring together the
student's experiences, language, thought, feedback, and read-
ing than through the language experience approach. Sylvia
Ashton-Warner describes in her book Teacher her method of
building all the language arts from an organic vocabulary.
It is organic because it springs from the innermost recesses
of the child's inner self, expressing his fears and desires.
These first words are the bridge from the known to the unknown
and from the inner man out. They are word pictures that have
power, for they represent the child's inner vision. They have
intense meaning, for they are a part of the thought processes
of the child himself. And thus Sylvia Ashton-Warner builds the

skills of reading and writing around the words of fear and love
and sex that make up the lives of the Maori children within
her classroom. Her system is in relation to the beginning
reader, but the process is meaningful at any age. Experience
approaches to learning can be initiated through television
viewing, movies, the comics, or any other type of media. Com-
parisons of plot, structure, setting, staging, dialogue, special
effects, character development, thematic content, and much more
can be developed from a common viewing experience. Other follow-
up activities may be group discussions, supplementary readings,
oral readings of a similar setting or theme, and so forth.

These suggestions have been illustrative and not in any
sense inclusive of techniques for working with children with
language differences. They have meant to illustrate the kinds
of things that teachers can do to capitalize on the strengths
that the student brings with him to the classroom. We have also
meant to indicate that the student or the group must at times
at least be the power variable psychologically within the class-
room; it need not always be the teacher. Role playing, activi-
ties growing out of language experience approaches, and the like,
can help bring together parts of both worlds -- the world of the
student and the world of the classroom. The student's percep-
tions from his environment are not interpreted as grostesque
but are superimposed upon the adopted culture, creating at least

a modicum of integrity for him within the capabilities of his own psychological system. Further, these activities have indicated interdependence between language, operant feedback, thought, and experience, and the power of these to reconstruct and reassociate through reading.

FOOTNOTES

1. Carl A. Lefevre, "Language and Self: Fulfillment or Trauma?" <u>Elementary English</u>, 43 (February, 1966), p. 126.

2. Alexander Johnson, <u>A Treatise on Language</u> (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1947), p. 54.

3. Vera P. John and Leo S. Goldstein, "The Social Context of Language Acquisition," in <u>Disadvantaged Child</u> (Seattle, Washington: Special Child Publications, 1967), pp. 457-469.

4. Thomas J. Edwards, "The Language Experience Attack on Cultural Deprivation", <u>The Reading Teacher</u>, 18 (April, 1965), pp. 546 - 51.

5. Jean Piaget, <u>Six Psychological Studies</u> (New York: Random House, 1968), p. xvi.

6. David Elkind, "Giant in the Nursery - Jean Piaget" <u>New York Times Magazine</u>, (May 26, 1968).

7. W. W. Wattenberg and C. Clifford, "Relationship of Self-concept to Beginning Achievement in Reading," <u>Childhood Education</u>, XLIII (September, 1966), p. 58.

8. Prescott Lecky, <u>Self-consistency - A Theory of Personality</u>, (Shoe-String Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 152 - 153.

9. Sol Tax, "Self and Society," from <u>Claremont Reading Conference 1968 Yearbook</u>, (Claremont, California: Claremont University Center).

10. Walter Loban, Teaching Children Who Use Social Class
     Dialects, _Elementary English_, 45 (May, 1968), pp. 592-9.

11. Carl A. Lefevre, "Language and Self: Fulfillment or Trauma?"
     Elementary English, (February, March, 1966), pp. 124-133;
     230-234.

12. Lessie Carlton and Robert H. Moore, _Reading, Self-_
     Directive Dramatization and Self-Concept, (Columbus,
     Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968).