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ABSTRACT

Any reputable approach to the teaching of reading makes use of certain psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic concepts which can provide the teacher with insights for the development and strengthening of reading skills. An understanding of the respect for the learner's cultural and behavioral patterns can establish group empathy, instrumental as a base for enlarging oral and written communication. Rather than deprecating the learner's dialect, the teacher should be familiar enough with it to know when corrections are called for and when they are not. By capitalizing on the dialect both semantically and syntactically, the teacher can broaden the learner's comprehension skills; furthermore, by using reading materials which reflect the needs of the learner, the teacher can increase the learner's willingness to use his language as a more effective means of communication. The teacher should be reminded of the importance of the learner's understanding and use of context clues in developing strategies appropriate to the nature of the materials on hand and for unlocking ideas in print--both of which lead to the successful completion of reading tasks. (HS)

Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics, Reading and the Classroom Teacher*

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Many teachers are bewildered and uncertain about concepts, procedures, and materials related to linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics. They are being bombarded by "loud and fuzzy" cries of publishers who announce "linguistic programs, psycholinguistic phonics, and dialectic patterns." Indeed, teachers should be pleased that we are probably learning more about language and the language user today than ever before, and that eventually we may have more complete and better organized information available. At this stage, however, the teacher must depend largely on himself and his ability to digest the information coming toward him or her at a fast and furious pace. (Not an easy task to be sure--but an essential one.) There is no, and should be no, linguistic or psycholinguistic or sociolinguistic METHOD of teaching reading. All methods of teaching reading involve linguistics (the study of language) in one form or other. And it is as foolish to speak of a psycholinguistic method or sociolinguistic method as it is to speak of a psychological or sociological method of teaching reading.

Any reputable approach to the teaching or learning of reading cannot help but make use of some of the basic tenets of linguistics, psychology, and sociology. The amalgamation of the disciplines adds

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dimensions of vital concern to the teacher and the learner for the spotlight is focused on societal or group language patterns (sociolinguistics) and the ways individuals think and behave (psycholinguistics) as they make use of language for their various purposes.

In the March, 1972 issue of The Reading Teacher Goodman synthesized much of his thinking (growing out of his research) about psycholinguistics and reading. He said, "As children strive to get meaning by processing written language, they begin to develop comprehension strategies. These are strategies for selecting and using the graphic information, predicting an underlying grammatical structure, and relating their experiences and concepts to written language." He went on to suggest, "If teachers can understand the significance of what children do as they read, they can provide useful, relevant materials, detect hangups children acquire, help a child to acquire useful strategies, and let go of nonproductive strategies. The teacher will be able to monitor the reading process as it develops."(2)

In light of these introductory comments, let me present some of the insights I have gathered. They are by no means agreed upon by all psycho-sociolinguists, linguists, or reading experts. They have been generated from the oral and written discourse of scholars, as well as from my varied experiences as I have studied these interrelated fields over the past years. Some are broad concepts which would stimulate little or no argument; others are speculative and possibly controversial. The number of inferences stated is by no means inclusive or conclusive; they are limited by both my present thinking and the space allotted for this paper.

1. The cultural patterns of a group or groups within the classroom should be studied, understood, and respected by the teacher. Time spent in trying to learn about and understand group behavior patterns will pay off in establishing the kind of group empathy instrumental as a base for enlarging oral communication and beginning or enhancing pupils' interactions with written communication. Once a group believes the teacher is honestly attempting to understand and respect aspects of its traditions, goals, and interest, communication lines are opened.

2. The behaviors of individuals within the classroom should be studied and understood by the teacher. Granted it is time-consuming and often complicated to do what amounts to case studies of the youngsters in a classroom, but the result can be significant. The teacher may want (at first) to conduct a "mini-case study" of those few children who seem to present problems. Case studies applied to one individual often help the teacher as he begins to look at another individual. Gates said that the conducting of comprehensive case studies with youngsters has transformed many teachers ". . .from routine operators to insightful artists. . . ." (1) The result of a case study is bound to help the learner and the teacher understand and respect each other--the basic ingredient of instruction.

3. The learner's dialect should be understood and respected. Language is used (normally) to communicate meaning. The child comes to school with a remarkable knowledge of how to gain meaning from oral language. Specifically, he is adept at obtaining meaning from his dialect, that which he has heard and used in his environment prior to school entrance and during his school attendance. If the teacher tries

to understand and respect that dialect and doesn't deprecate it, the child will be able to express his thoughts. If the teacher studies the dialect and learns what is part of that dialect system and what is not, the teacher will know when corrections are called for and when they are not.

If the dialect is denigrated and not understood, the learner will stop using language almost completely in the classroom, or will cease to use it for positive communication, and will look for ways of using it in negative behavior. In any case, he will most likely make little conscious effort to learn the changes in the rules presented by the dialect used in school and business--often referred to as "standard English."

If the student is given many opportunities to use language as an expresser of meaning, and to search for meaning in the language of others, he will gradually learn to cope with "standard English" which represents a dialect needed at this point in time to gain upward mobility in society. Without doubt, transitions to "standard English usage" must be made or the school is failing in its task.

4. Initial reading experiences should capitalize on the learner's dialect. The learner should recognize a need to transfer from oral to written language in order to receive a message of importance to him. Such an abstract, high-flung goal as "you need to learn to read because it will help you all the way through school and life" is a feeble excuse for reading in the minds of most youngsters. Initial messages to be read should parallel the learner's dialect both semantically (words and groups of words standing for understood concepts) and syntactically

(language patterns or structures familiar to the language user). There is some question in my mind whether or not the teacher would want to parallel the dialect graphophonologically (sounds written down as stated). For, if a child is permitted to use his own dialect when reading orally (and, of course, there is no problem when he is reading silently), I see little reason for his having to have the orthography printed or written in the dialect. As long as the comprehending is adequate, the pronouncing does not have to be standard.

If the learner writes some words in his dialect, that is his perogative. Certainly there will be times when the teacher will write some phrases in dialect when it is natural to do so in simulating a written conversation. The important point to be made is that the youngster must not feel that his dialect is automatically turned off once he approaches the printed word. Indeed, part of the problem in learning to read may result from the tension created by the need to read and write accurately that had never been demanded when the child was learning to speak and listen.

5. Instructional materials and recreational materials used in beginning reading programs should be selected on the bases of significance and relevance. Reading, particularly in beginning stages, should (as implied earlier) satisfy immediate goals. The messages should have significance and relevance in terms of solving problems, supplying enjoyment, enhancing ability. The material read should, inasmuch as feasible, satisfy the present interests and needs of the specific learners in given learning situations. Too often our reading programs have been largely literature programs emphasizing the literary and the

narrative. Certainly part of the reading diet should be narrative in nature, but the diet should be well balanced. In all probability, a large number of boys and even girls would gain more from beginning reading experiences if initial materials placed more stress on expository and utilitarian reading.

The manner in which the material is written should also be considered. Styles and syntactical structures should not, certainly at the outset, be far outside the language-experience backgrounds of the learners. In the past many preprimers and primers began with sentence structures and writing styles foreign to the learner. Although perhaps not as rhythmic, "John sees Mary. Mary sees John." is certainly a lot closer to the basic language patterns of most dialects in contrast to "See, John, see. Oh, Mary, see." Young readers rather quickly learn to contend with a variety of styles and structures if the transition period is carefully planned.

6. Since most messages are transmitted through a series of interrelated words, sentences, or paragraphs, minimal attention in reading instruction should be placed on the recognition and analysis of individual, isolated words. Maximum attention to phonic and structural analysis of individual words isolated from the rest of language is uneconomical and needlessly frustrating for many pupils. In this type of instruction the learner can only depend on one aspect of language, the graphophonological, rather than making use of the syntactic and semantic as well.

In my opinion, large numbers of pupils have been prevented from learning how to read and enjoy reading by the word list method. Not only have they come to think of reading as a mechanical exercise, but they have been kept from using cues represented within the total context

of a message. They've only been equipped to decode words rather than language.

In all probability for some learners in some situations teachers do have to place some emphasis on helping learners figure out phoneme-grapheme relationships. This inference is in no way a denunciation of such help. It is instead a plea for not using just one aspect of language as a tool particularly on words removed from their natural environments. The inference which follows suggests a strategy for using the many cues to figuring out a message represented by written symbols.

7. The learner develops and needs to be helped to develop strategies for unlocking the ideas found on the printed page. Rather than place attention on absolute accuracy in reading the words in print, emphasis should be placed on utilizing the least number of cues to obtain the author's meaning. As a number of psycholinguists have implied or even stated, reading should be an intelligent guessing game, making use of whatever aspects of language are needed as the reader searches for the meaning. The learner should be encouraged to make errors in his search for meaning; this is how he learns. The teacher should understand, encourage, and delight in the miscues of his young charges as he helps them make use of such a strategy in search of meaning. According to Smith in his new book, Understanding Reading, "This readiness to take chances is a critical matter for beginning readers who may be forced to pay too high a price for making 'errors.' The child who stays silent (who 'misses') rather than risk a 'false alarm' by guessing at a letter or word before he is absolutely sure of it, may

please his teacher but develop a habit of setting his criterion too high for efficient reading."(9)

The "guessing game" should become less chaotic as youngsters learn and teachers help in the development of strategies to use when parts of messages are confusing or unknown. The most essential strategy appears to be the utilization of context. The pupil should learn to search a given context intensively when he is stopped by a confusing or unknown message. The context which provides the answer may be a phrase, clause, sentence, group of sentences, paragraph, or group of paragraphs. Often the reason for not understanding the message will be an unknown word or two, or a new use of known words. An inspection of interrelationships among words and the function of the word or words within the structure of a sentence will often result in the unlocking of the message. Such is the reading behavior of the mature reader, and emphasis should be placed on the use of context strategy right from the very beginning of reading instruction.

When context alone is not sufficient, the reader should be encouraged to use the strategy of looking at the beginning of the word or words. He should be helped to relate this inspection of initial graphemes to the context again. These combinations of strategies will frequently permit the reader to interpret the message. (Obviously if the reader keeps meeting words with the same initial graphemes and can't read them, the teacher will develop a lesson to assist him--interrelating the phonographological cue with context cues.)

In some cases readers will want to and need to inspect the final grapheme in a word, or divide a long word into parts as they try to

figure out the word in relation to context. By the time they resort to this strategy the message either becomes clear rather promptly or they are forced to resort to the help of the dictionary or some other outside authority.

Whatever the strategy or group of strategies learned and/or employed, the important point to be made is that the teacher should be available to help the learner marshall what he already knows about language, and what he is learning, into useful procedures for unlocking ideas in print.

8. Reading tasks are dictated by the nature of the language user, the nature of the material, and the purposes to be met. There is no specific sequence of skills to be taught in reading instruction. Sequences of skills to be learned in various reading programs have most frequently been devised on the bases of speech development, developmental needs of children, and/or the logical thinking of program designers. In reality, though, sequence is only relevant when related to the language knowledges and inadequacies of particular learners, the nature of the material to be read, and the purposes for reading. Reading skills are actually a system of strategies the learner acquires for discovering meaning, evaluating meaning, and utilizing meaning. If the strategies are appropriate for the purpose of the reading and the nature of the material on hand, a given reading task will be successful.

In that light it behooves a teacher to help the learner diagnose his language strengths and weaknesses in relation to the material to be read. For example: If the reader is beginning to encounter numerous words with the vowel pattern of ea within them, and he is unable to figure them out

even with the help of the existing context, the teacher should structure some help. He should be given opportunities,using context familiar to him, to note that the vowel pattern of ea is most often pronounced in two ways--ē or ĕ. He may then go back to the less familiar context and try his new strategy. For those readers who have already generalized the ea pattern, there is no need for them to "be taught."

The nature of the material to be used must also be carefully explored for there is no reason for the learner to attempt to acquire a strategy at a given point in time when it will not be functional for him. A complete reading program cannot be presented in any meaningful way within the framework of any given set of reading materials. Strategies for unlocking ideas should be acquired as a reader utilizes printed materials throughout a school curriculum. The wide variety of patterns of writing requires a variety of strategies for interpreting them. For example: It might be argued that one strategy a mature reader ought to develop is the ability to note cause and effect relationships in printed material. This strategy can be practiced in some narrative materials, but the cause-effect writing pattern occurs most often in expository materials, particularly in social studies. Here, then, is the most reasonable time and place to learn how to unlock ideas presented in a cause-effect pattern.

Purpose constantly interacts with both the reader, the writer, and the material to be read. Any piece of material can be read utilizing different strategies for different purposes, and the task is hardly ever clearcut. For example: If the reader is searching for the solution to a problem, he doesn't care much what the writer's purpose was as long

as the information is available. In all probability if the writer's purpose and the reader's happened to coincide, the task would be a trifle easier. A very different set of strategies has to be employed, however, when the reader is trying to discover the writer's purpose--particularly if the writing is somewhat subtle.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When we look at <u>reading</u> from a psycholinguistic and/or sociolinguistic viewpoint, we become very much aware of the complexities involved in having two people--the reader and the writer--carry on a meaningful dialogue. It becomes evident that more study is needed of the process--or processes--of reading. But obviously psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic insights exist which can be useful in guiding each learner to strengthen strategies as he or she unlocks ideas in a variety of materials for multiple purposes.

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