DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 071 049 CS 000 308

AUTHOR Fleming, James T.
TITLE Promoting Language Skills in Preschool Programs.
PUB DATE 25 Apr 71
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Assn. (16th, Atlantic City, New Jersey, April, 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Disadvantaged Youth; Early Childhood Education; *Language Development; *Language Skills; *Language Styles; Language Usage; *Preschool Programs
IDENTIFIERS British Infant Schools

ABSTRACT

Early Childhood programs designed to promote improved language skills are assessed in terms of contrastive assumptions underlying a different vs. deficient point of view. Both positions are rejected as inadequate because of their lack of correspondence to both theory and reality, and an alternative theory of communicative competence is proposed. Implications for teachers are discussed with regard to reducing concern for the form of language and concentrating rather on structuring optimal social contexts wherein young children may have better opportunities to use their language, thus dispelling the myth that children can't talk while recognizing that there may be compelling reasons why they may not. A brief comparison is made between observed language activities in British and American early school settings. (Author)

Abstract

Promoting Language Skills in Preschool Programs

James T. Fleming

State University of New York at Albany

Early Childhood programs designed to promote improved language skills are assessed in terms of contrastive assumptions underlying a different vs. deficient point of view. Both positions are rejected as inadequate, because of their lack of correspondence to both theory and reality, and an alternate theory of communicative competence is proposed.

Implications for teachers are discussed with regard to reducing concern for the form of language and concentrating rather on structuring optimal social contexts wherein young children may have better opportunities to use their language, thus dispelling the myth that children can't talk while recognizing that they there may be compelling reasons why they may not. A brief comparison is made between observed language activities in British and American early school settings.

(Symposium on Developing and Articulating an Early Childhood Education Program; annual meeting of the International Reading Association, Atlantic City, New Jersey, April 25, 1971)

James T. Fleming
School of Education
State University of New York
at Albany
1400 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12203

PROMOTING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

(Symposium: Developing and Articulating an Early Childhood Education Program)

Of all the substantive concerns related to preschool programs, the topic of language skills has been and continues to be prominently considered. This central concern for promoting language skills is of course understandable, for through its many uses, language functions as the medium for a large part of instruction and learning, in formal and in informal settings during the earliest years of any child's life.

If many early childhood specialists in years past did not note all that explicitly the importance of language skills, this oversight can well be interpreted against the background of at least three probable factors: 1) studies of childrens language acquisition which have incorporated major changes in investigative approach as well as linguistic theory have become more widely known only within the past decade; 2) notions of what constitutes readiness for intellectual attention; 3) the demands of many heretofore rather quiet segments of society have challenged many underlying assumptions, overt practices, and apparent outcomes of traditional preschool activities.

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Reading Conference, Atlantic City, New Jersey, April 22, 1971.

As a result of these and many other intersecting events, early childhood educators on the one hand seem to be in the enviable position of not having to lobby their major cause, while on the other hand in the somewhat unenviable position of keeping ahead amidst the increasing clamor for accountability, all the while attempting to provide and implement the best resources they know of for stimulating optimal learning in young children. Although much of the discussion in this paper can be applied to preschool programs designed for any population of youngsters, the major thrust will be concerned with that population which usually is labelled "disadvantaged." This would seem to be more than a reasonable aim inasmuch as a preoccupation with language skills frequently prompts the most controversy in preschool programs for disadvantaged children.

Different vs Deficient Language

Particularly within the last five years or so, the overriding controversy related to disadvantaged children's language can most economically be traced to and described as the deficiency vs difference issue. Essentially, adherents of a "deficiency" point of view would include in their terminology to describe, for example, black ghetto children's language, such phrases as "non-verbal," "verbally deprived," and even the term "verbally destitute" can be encountered on occasion. Cazden has recently referred to this issue in the following cogent manner:...

> the school language problems of lower-class children can have two explanations: either they have acquired less language than middle-class children, or they have acquired a different language. The less-language ex-

> planation has been given various names--cultural deprivation, deficit hypothesis, vacuum ideology--all with the same connotation of a nonverbal child somehow emptier of language than his more-socially fortunate age-mates (5, p. 81).

This deficit hypothesis or "deficiency" point of view has been most obvious in the writings and programs of such individuals as Deutsch and Bereiter and Engelmann (2). In this same context, it might be noted that Basil Bernstein's early and widely disseminated speculations on "elaborated" and "restricted" codes also, at least indirectly, tended to support a deficit hypothesis (3). Taken in its extreme form, many individuals were inclined to interpret Bereiter's views as indicative of some black children's possessing "no language at all," or at least no language worth serious consideration.

Prominent among those who have increasingly opposed the deficit hypothesis are Baratz and Shuy (1), Labov (12), and Stewart (15), all of whom have insisted for example, that the black ghetto child's language, is no more nor less deficient that any other form of speech, but in fact that it is simply different. All of these individuals have conducted intensive studies of some black dialects, and their findings are indisputable: these nonstandard forms reflect a formally structured linguistic system and consequently should not be viewed as abnormal deviations from the norms of standard English. In effect, this form of nonstandard speech is not merely a bundle of random "errors," and clearly not some "primitive," half-formed, or less than complete system incapable of allowing its user to express any idea or feeling which he is capable of experiencing.

At this point, the preschool educator may well ask: what is to be made of this controversy? Does it represent just a case of "semantics" --a splitting of hairs carried on by theorists who are not concerned with the practical and all too obvious problems of promoting language skills at the preschool level and beyond ? Or does the controversy reflect a shield of sentimentality or false egalitarianism, so as to support an "everybody's equal" (and usually the concomitant) plaint, "so that means 'anything goes' with regard to language?' Unfortunately, a resolution of this controversy will take much more than merely a shift in sentiment or semantic choice, because as with so many facets of language matters, information about language represents only the tip of the iceberg. The large mass underneath is a complex of long-nurtured attitudes toward language and language use, all of which become quite personal when they surface and all the more difficult to cope with just because many of these attitudes rarely are displayed in any conventionally defined sense of consciousness or easily understandable form. In short, most individuals are not prone to introspection about things they have long taken for granted, and language, because of its obviousness -- its ubiquitous nature -- is taken for granted most often by most individuals.

Linguistic vs Communicative Competence

How then might one move toward a reconciliation of the deficiency vs. different points of view, for clearly neither position alone represents an acceptable position, because in this writer's opinion, neither position alone accords all that well with theory or reality. In this regard, it is truly unfortunate that until rather recently, this divisiveness has been exacerbated further by several tenets put forth by Noam Chomsky, one of this country's most

distinguished theorists in linguistics. Although the related technical aspects of his writings need not detain us here, it is important to note two points. 1) In a widely quoted passage, Chomsky claimed that

> Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (6, p. 3).

2) To this writer's knowledge, no linguist accepts the deficiency point of view, regardless of whether or not he agrees wholly, in part, or not at all with Chomsky's notions. It was only a few years ago that another well-known linguist, Dell Hymes, squarely faced this issue and insightfully, and one might add elegantly, suggested a resolution. As a participant at Yeshiva University in a research planning conference on language development in disadvantaged children, Hymes delivered a short paper titled "On Communicative Competence," in which he referred to Chomsky's ideal speaker-listener model mentioned above with the following remarks:

> When the image of the unfolding, mastering, fluent child is set beside the real children in many of our schools, the theoretical basis of the image is seen for what is is, not a <u>doctrine of irrelevance</u>, but a <u>doctrine of poignancy.</u> Such theory is based on the essential equality and potential of each

> child in his or her capacity simply as human being. It is noble in that it can inspire one with the belief that even the most dispiriting conditions can be transformed; and it is an indispensable weapon against views which would explain the communicative difficulties of groups of children as inherent, perhaps racial. (10, p. 2).

Later in this same paper, Hymes briefly suggested that the scope of an important distinction in linguistic theory be broadened. Much has been written about the distinction between linguistic competence and linguistic performance, wherein the former conventionally has been restricted to the speaker's tacit or intuitive knowledge of language and the latter to the use he makes of that knowledge in concrete situations. The dilemma for most individuals seriously concerned with language and language use evolved as a result of a theoretical or logical point which seemed to be insisted upon, namely that performance could not be satisfactorily explained or understood without a prior and equally satisfactory explication of the assumed underlying competence. In recognizing the equally poignant inadequacy of such a narrow view, Hymes suggested that any useful theory of communicative competence, as he nicely put it, should be built around the observation that:

> Data from very early in life, the first years of acquisition of grammar, show children to develop rules for the use of different forms in different situations .... Competency for use is part of the same developmental matrix as competency for grammar.

> ...Within the developmental matrix in which children acquire the knowledge in principle of the set of sentences of a language they also acquire the knowledge in principle of a set of ways in which sentences are used; and they internalize attitudes toward a language and its (sic) uses, and indeed, toward language itself (including, e.g., attentiveness to it) or its place in a pattern of mental abilities. (10, pp. 5-6).

From a theoretical point of view, Hymes's suggestion, which now is more fully developed in a more recent publication (11), is most important; from a practical point of view, his suggestion acknowledges what many good teachers have long known: the social context of learning, particularly language learning, is at least as important as the specific aim of the activity, and some consideration and understanding of this oft-neglected situation may go a long way toward enabling children to proceed profitably in oral language situations, at the preschool level and well into the elementary grades. (5).

Language Form and Language Use

To cite one distinction with wide-ranging implications especially for practices in preschool settings, some understanding of the considerations mentioned above may lead us to pay less heed to language form and more to language use. It may allow us to better structure school situations wherein children's language will come into use, provided we are constantly and consistently mindful of some simple yet necessary prerequisites for children's language to be used. Some very obvious factors which have been noted often include "adult participation, something concrete to talk about, physical arrangements, and noise. (4). "Similar considerations may force us to move away from a position where we might insist that a child can't

(is incapable of, or has no capacity to) use his language for any number of purposes in discovering why he doesn't, or isn't in the habit of using his language in this or that manner or setting, and then set about trying to remedy the situation. In short, our assumptions regarding children's language use should be more open and optimistic, and our concerns for the form of the language should, with some exceptions, come to occupy a singularly second-rated priority.

"Proper" Form vs Productive Use

In this context, there are many clues to be found in a slim but nonetheless remarkable paperback which was received by this writer just prior to finishing some thoughts for this paper. Edited by Margaret Early, it is titled Language Face to Face (Developing a Language Centered Curriculum at the Hemen Street School, 9). One of the reports in this collection of papers provides an account by Mrs. Christine San Jose of her observations while visiting some primary schools in Leicestershire. The response to her questions concerning "standard dialect" -- the extent to which it was preferred and the manner and frequency with which it was taught -- illustrates a refreshing point of view:

> In the evening I brought up the subject with a teacher of 6- to 7-year olds in what might be called a very underprivileged neighborhood. She obviously considered the dialect question of minimal importance. "Well, you're thankful to get them writing and talking at all, aren't you?" was her reaction. As I pursued the matter, she said that sometimes she would point out the most glaring discrepancies, in written work, to the brightest children. But she would rather accept "I ain't done nowt" and go on from there than

> hold up proceedings -- perhaps stop them dead -- insisting on "I haven't done anything." She was adamant about work habits, especially perseverance, and classroom manners; she considered teaching a social responsibility, not just a pedagogical task. But apparently dialect wasn't worrying her (14, p. 94)

In the opening passage of her account, Mrs. San Jose posed a series of vitally important questions:

> Over the past few years, a great deal has been written about what's going on in progressive British primary schools. But surprisingly little has been set down about language development. We have seen some samples of children's personal writing and photographs of drama. But what of language throughout the day? Is there anything in the actual set-up of the progressive schools in England that influences language development? Is there anything we might like to implement here? Would it be possible? These were the questions in my mind as I recently looked around primary schools in Leicestershire. (14, p. 89).

Knowledge and Attitudes about Language

In the concluding remarks of her paper, Mrs. San Jose suggested that "there seems to be some indication that a possible language framework evolved from recent research is not yet operative in the schools. (14, p. 101)." If the English primary teacher's responses cited above are typical, Mrs. San Jose's conclusion would seem to be unwarranted, especially if one again wished to invoke the distinction between explicit form and implicit operationalism. The bulk of Mrs. San Jose's

description attests to what was observed in the British report by John Dixon on the Dartmouth Seminar 1966 (The Anglo-American Conference) to the English language teaching profession:

> With regard to "knowledge" the two delegations passed each other in mid-Atlantic, as Nelson Francis remarked. Looked at from outside, the U.K. is the home of an educational tradition that throws the weight on examination syllabuses, rigorous and early specialism, and academic knowledge; the U.S. on the other hand, might be thought to stand for pragmatic learning, general education, and progressive schools. However, as we learnt, traditions change.
>
> In the U.K. a breakaway from the constrictions of the tradition has recently given new emphasis to experience and to the operational use of language to handle, order and come to terms with it. (8, p. 72).

Is it just possible that the British, with particular regard to the philosophy, aims and practices of early childhood programs, have been more able than we in this country to move away from a preoccupation with "proper language forms" to a more defensible concern for extended, productive language use? No matter what the verdict here, two brief comments from others may sum up much of this paper's central focus.

In the final paragraph of her introduction to Language Face to Face, Margaret Early noted:

> Accountability is as much on our minds these days as openness and freedom. We do not believe that the concept are incompatible. But having seen the effects on teachers

> and children of a narrow accounting of skills acquisition in just one phase of language development, we would urge a concept of accountability that measures not only learning but zest for learning. (9, p. 12).

Her words serve as a timely echo of one of Walter Loban's concise contributions to the Dartmouth Seminar of 1966 mentioned above:

> ... if your evaluation is narrow and mechanical, this is what the curriculum will be. (13, p. 92).

These two comments could well be constant reminders that no curriculum for early childhood schooling should reflect the narrow or the mechanical, for this state of affairs represents the antithesis of any hope for promoting useful language skills.

REFERENCES

1. Baratz, Joan and Shuy, Roger, (Eds.). Teaching Black Children to Read. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1969.

2. Bereiter, Carl and Engelmann, Siegfried. Teaching Disadvantaged Children in the Preschool. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

3. Bernstein, Basil. "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and some Consequences," in A.G. Smith, (Ed.), Communication and Culture. New York: Holt, Rinhart & Winston, 1966.

4. Cazden, Courtney. Environmental Assistance to the Child's Acquisition of Grammar. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1965.

5. _____. "The Neglected Situation in Child Language Research and Education," in Frederick Williams, (Ed.), Language and Poverty. (Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph Series) Chicago, Ill.: Markham Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 81-101.

6. Chomsky, Noam. Aspects of the Theory of Syntax. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1965.

7. Deutch, Martin and associates. The Disadvantaged Child. New York: Basic Books, 1967.

8. Dixon, John. Growth Through English (A Report Based on the Dartmouth Seminar 1966). Reading, England: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1967.

9. Early, Margaret, (Ed.). Language Face to Face. Syracuse, N.Y.: and Language Arts Center, Syracuse University, 1971.

10. Hymes, Dell. "On Communicative Competence," In Research Planning Conference on Language Development in Disadvantaged Children. New York: Ferkauf Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yeshiva University, 1964.

11. _____. "On Communicative Competence," in R. Huxley and E. Ingram, (Eds.), The Mechanisms of Language Development. London, England : CIBA Foundation, 1971.

12. Labov, William. "The Logic of Nonstandard English," in James Alatis, (Ed.). Twentieth Annual Round Table Meeting on Languages and Linguistics Studies (Monograph Series No. 22, 1969). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1970, pp. 1-43.

13. Loban, Walter as quoted by John Dixon, in Growth Through English (A Report Based on the Dartmouth Seminar 1966). Reading, England: National Association for the Teaching of English, 1967, p. 92.

14. San Jose, Christine. "Language Throughout the Integrated Day," in Margaret Early, (Ed). Language Face to Face. Syracuse, N.Y.: Reading and Language Arts Center, Syracuse University, 1971, pp. 89-106.

15. Stewart, William "Urban Negro Speech: Sociolinguistic Factors Affecting English Teaching," in R.W. Shuy, (Ed.), Social Dialects and Language Learning. Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965, pp. 10-18.