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ABSTRACT

Although the middle class child may come to school with a fairly large and useful vocabulary, teachers must be concerned with the extension of that vocabulary beyond its present limits. While the language of the middle class child is probably not an important concern in the choice of reading methods or the selection of word lists, it does have relevance for the procedures to be used within a given method. Specific suggestions for classroom teachers of middle class children concerning the introduction of words in reading include extending children's oral language, utilizing peer conversations, arousing interests, developing a literature program, making use of context clues in literature, emphasizing the relationship of the spoken to the written word, implementing word lists, becoming aware of the language used in instruction, and teaching respect for the diversity of dialects in our culture. (KS)

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THE LANGUAGE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS CHILD AND THE INTRODUCTION OF WORDS IN BEGINNING READING: Some Implications for the Classroom Teacher

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At first glance at a topic dealing with the language of the middle class child, an educator's response might be that, "they talk like they're supposed to," and then to move on to another area that promises to be more interesting . . . such as "Syntactical Structures of Aleut Indian Three Year Olds," or "Sex Correlates of Mean Length of Utterance of Forty Year Old College Professors." Obviously, the previous statement is made with tongue-in-cheek. But there are some whose reactions might be that there is no need for concern when the middle class child is the focus of attention: that is, that this child's language is adequate for learning the words to be introduced in beginning reading. Case closed. If this is your reaction, then consider for a moment the great range of life styles, of cultural backgrounds, of educational antecedents, of experiences, and of attitudes of children from lower-middle and middle-middle and upper-middle class homes. Consider for a moment the individual

variability found within any social class group. And, finally, consider the tendency of educators in the American culture to be dissatisfied with the status quo and to continually press for greater achievement from all children.

This paper is addressed not to the researcher, and not to the supervisor, but from one experienced classroom teacher to others. So,--what does the language of the middle class child have to do with the introduction of words in beginning reading, and, specifically, in pragmatic terms, what implications does this have for the classroom teacher?

First of all, the language of the middle class child is probably not an important concern in the choice of reading methods. We have good evidence that children do have the oral vocabulary to comprehend words that are introduced in primary reading materials currently in use (Cohen and Kornfeld, 1970; Dale and Schuh, 1971). And, evidence that children do learn to read regardless of the teaching methods used (Bond and Dykstra, 1967; Harris, et al., 1968).

Secondly, the language of the middle class child probably does not have importance in selection of word lists. For the reading teacher, the question of selection of word lists may be of importance, but for the classroom teacher it probably is not. This is because the words to be taught, at least during a structured reading lesson, are not decided upon by the classroom teacher, but by the method she selects to use. For many methods, such as the basal reader method, the materials dictate the words

to be introduced; in other methods, such as the language experience approach, the child's language does.

This is also the case when considering the debate of whether there should be vocabulary control when introducing words in beginning reading. This question is one of prime importance to the supervisor serving on a textbook selection committee, but once method and material have been decided upon it probably is not of great importance to the classroom teacher in planning daily instructional strategies.

But, third, the language of the middle class child may have relevance for procedures the teacher chooses to follow within a given method, and during the total school program. Although the middle class child comes to school with a fairly large and useful vocabulary, we still must be concerned with the extension of that vocabulary beyond its present limits. This must be done to insure future reading growth, the understanding of concepts to be taught in content area subjects, and the child's full enjoyment when reading independently.

Examples of some concerns classroom teachers of middle class children should have in the introduction of words to beginning readers, might include the following ten suggestions:

1. Extending children's oral language has positive benefits in increasing reading vocabulary. Children enlarge their speaking vocabularies best by production of speech, not by listening to it. Be sure when writing experience stories with your children that you do not do all of the talking.

2. Children seem to produce a greater quantity of speech when talking with their peers than with adults. For a change, how about writing experience stories this way: tape record peer conversations; then later write them for your students to read.

3. Children's interests should be aroused, not just followed. To insure extension of children's vocabularies through new interests, if you have selected as an approach to teaching reading one in which the children primarily use their own experience stories, be sure that you also give your students many, many experiences with library books.

4. Include a regularly scheduled literature program in your daily plan, regardless of the reading method used. Readers of books do extend their vocabularies more than non-readers.

5. Exposure to good literature, through listening or through reading, has another important bonus. Use of context clues has long been considered an important strategy for word recognition and for understanding word meanings. Good writers of children's literature are skillful in using context to illustrate meaning. Three well-known examples of books for young children where authors have done a superb job of this are Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel (Burton, 1939), Millions of Cats (Gag, 1928), and Make Way for Ducklings (McCloskey, 1941). YOU be on the lookout for others. (Also, see Cohen, 1969.)

6. Take a look at one of the word lists that has been prepared by examining primary level library books (for example, see Moe, 1973). Do your students know these basic words needed to read independently? Which of your students do not? What could you do about this?

7. It's important to the learning of new words that children become aware of the pairings between spoken words and printed words. This can happen when you read aloud to a child on a one-to-one basis and he can see the words as he hears you reading them. It does not happen when you stand in front of the class to read. When reading aloud to your young students, each day allow one or two children to sit beside you as you read. Or, invite older students to read aloud to your children one or two at a time. Or use taped stories where the students can follow the words in the book as they listen to the story being read aloud.

8. Be aware of the language of instruction that you use or that is employed by materials you have the children read. The "language of instruction" means terminology and concepts such as different, alike, rhyme, beginning, etc., that you use when giving instructions like "Mark the word that is different." Or, "Which of these two words rhyme?" In a recently reported study (Hardy, et al., 1974), fifty-seven such concepts were identified in reading tests and materials for kindergarten and first grade. Frequently, children are

expected to respond to these words or concepts through listening or reading before they have been introduced formally as a part of the planned reading program. Being aware of the language of instruction means considering it a part of your task of word introduction to assess children's understanding of these words and concepts, and to work with those they do not understand.

9. We have already stated that extending children's oral language has positive benefits in increasing reading vocabulary. This means that the teacher should plan times during the day for direct instructional activities for developing oral language. Since the teacher already must plan for reading instruction, arithmetic lessons, spelling and handwriting, science and social studies, health and creative writing, economics and environmental studies, collecting milk money and teaching sex education, how can she find time to plan structured lessons for oral language development? One aid to the teacher in this are the published materials in this area that are currently becoming available. An excellent critical review of these materials may be found in Language in Childhood Education edited by Courtney Cazden (1972), to be used in selecting programs which are good and avoiding those which are mediocre.

10. And finally, this last suggestion for the middle class child, perhaps is not as important to the concern of introducing words as to the child's understanding of language. That is, to teach him to respect the dialect and word usage of other children. In our upwardly mobile, geographically mobile society, the middle class child is most unlikely to be shielded from the diversity of language present in our pluralistic society. You can provide opportunities for children to have experiences with and to gain respect for and interest in diversity. One thing you can do is to provide opportunities to discuss differences in words used to describe objects and actions by children from different areas of the country or segments of our culture. Another thing you can do is to help children to respect all dialects and one of many procedures to accomplish this is to have puppet shows where the story is first acted out in one dialect and then in another.

In the suggestions I have presented to you, I have tried to suggest both structured, carefully planned activities and also to suggest the provision of a full, rich environment, for I believe that if you are guilty of "either--or" thinking in providing a program of word introduction for middle class beginning readers, then you end up with only half a program in this important area.

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