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ABSTRACT

Understanding the literacy process and using the child as the informant will ensure a better learning experience. Two fundamental assumptions of language learning provide a base for understanding the literacy process. Firstly, the decisions a child makes while searching for meaning in a literacy event are the same ones made by an adult, involving the following cognitive strategies: a constant search for meaning, hypothesis testing, alteration of ideas because of hypothesis testing, and taking risks. Secondly, there are eight patterns within the literacy process that all language learners incorporate: (1) organization; (2) intentionality; (3) generativeness (engagement and reengagement in the event); (4) risk-taking; (5) social action; (6) demonstration; (7) context; and (8) text. In order to make the best possible judgments concerning curriculum and evaluation, the child should be the source of information. Educators should know what the child's background knowledge consists of, and what strategies children use in their literacy processes that are either conducive and detrimental to success. Educators should watch the child involved in the process in as natural a setting as possible, ensure that ownership of the process remains with the child, and test their own educational assumptions while interacting and observing. These approaches will give the educator a far more complete picture of the learner than the best-written basal. (SR)

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Until we understand the characteristics of the successful trip as well as what conditions made the successful trip possible, we are in a poor position, as language educators, to create a supportive environment in which language learners might encounter quality language learning experiences (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 73).

Imagine, if you will, a trip being completely planned for you by a team of "experts" living in a different area of the country. You haven't any input as to where you are going, where you would like to go, who you will be with, what you will do, and how long the trip will last. Your decision making is limited to what clothes you will take and what food you will eat (from their prepared menu). Whether or not you have enjoyed the trip or changed because of it is also based upon their criteria . . . no substitutions allowed.

Frustrating? Outrageous? Impossible? Such is the trip taken by the learner whose teacher is dependent solely on the basal. In such a scenario, curricular decisions follow the steps written out by the authors of the text. Evaluation is based upon what they have thought a learner should have gotten out of it.

The focus of this article is to present the assumptions that, in dealing with the language learner we, as educators, need to understand what is involved in a successful literacy event in order to create the necessary supportive environment where the learner would encounter quality language learning experiences. We also need to base our curricular and evaluative decisions on what the child is doing and has done. The learner needs to be our foundation for curricular information. Evaluation must look at the processes involved in the learning as well as the product displayed. Understanding the literacy process and using the child as the informant will insure a better "trip" taken by the learner, ending up with a satisfied customer.

Understanding the Literacy Process

A child doesn't need to know any linguistics in order to use language to learn; but a teacher needs to know some linguistics if he wants to understand how the process takes place . . . or what is going wrong when it doesn't (Halliday, 1980, p. 11).

Before we discuss the reasons for using the child as the informant, two fundamental assumptions of language learning must be established. The first is that the decisions a child makes while searching for meaning in a literacy event are the same made by an adult. Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) believe that the following cognitive strategies are always functioning regardless of the number of experiences the language user has had: a constant search for meaning, hypothesis testing, alteration of ideas because of hypothesis testing, and taking risks.

If one were to think about what you did the last time you weren't sure of the conventional spelling of a word, you would be aware of what the early language learner is also doing. First, you may have some idea of how long the word should be and what letters are involved. Next you know that, if you are to communicate your thoughts to an audience, you need to be as close to the conventional spelling as possible. It has to make sense. Now you look at your series of attempted spellings and decide which one looks like what you would expect. This may result in deciding to use one of these or to look the word up in the dictionary. Regardless of the decision, you have taken the necessary risks, you have tried to make sense, and you have changed because of the process. (Hopefully you'll now remember the conventional spelling.) Although a young language learner may not use the dictionary or may not even get close to the conventional spelling while writing, s/he will have gone through the same process that you just have.

The second general assumption in language learning is that there are patterns within the literacy process that all language learners incorporate. The first of these eight patterns is organization. Harste et al. (1984) believe that "the responses of young children to reading and writing experiences are systematic and organized reflections of personal social decisions" (p. 82). In their attempt to make meaning, even young language users know that different forms of surface texts have different functions depending upon the intentionality, and that such texts will signify certain meanings to members of their interpretive community. They also realize that the language is organized in certain ways so that communication occurs. Organized speech as well as written text have semantic, syntactic, and phonemic organization based upon the social context of the literacy event. Such organizational decisions are not randomly made but are rule-governed.

The second pattern, intentionality, is seen as the "propelling force in literacy" (p. 191). Because the language user assumes that the marks that are made on a page have the power to signify something to someone, intentionality governs every literacy discovery. Even as adults, when encountering the unconventional, we automatically assume that the author is attempting to signify meaning. He has intentions of communication. The younger language user also makes this decision. This decision plays a central role in literacy learning.

A third pattern in the literacy process involves the generativeness of language experiences. As a language user incorporates any expression of language, he is simultaneously learning from that process. This engagement and reengagement in the literacy event encourages cognitive as well as communicative functions . . . a sort of stepping stone to learning.

Risk taking is a pattern of key importance to the cognitive process of language learning. Because learning occurs when the learner deals with something new, instead of avoiding the unknown, risk taking is essential in the development of new rules and responses. As Vygotsky (1978) states, the learners become "a head taller than their current selves" (cited in Harste et al., p. 136). It is crucial that the constraints present in the environment constitute a low-risk situation for the language user. Otherwise, s/he may choose not to take part. This is

dysfunctional because only through engagement in the process can one grow within that process.

Language is social. It cannot occur in isolation. Even a prisoner in solitary confinement assumes he has a reader for his written text. Social action is a pattern in the literacy process in that the language user develops a successful use of language through interaction with as well as observation of other successful language users. This pattern is closely tied to the pattern of demonstration. The language user is never bored with the literacy process if s/he feels it's significant to him/her. What others demonstrate as strategies resulting in a successful literacy event will be incorporated into the language user's process. Familiar strategies will be revisited and connected to the new ones attempted. This unity is fundamental to growth in the process.

The final two patterns in the literacy process, context and text, are also closely related. Language is a whole system in which context is not a variable but an essential part. Print does not have meaning outside of the context, or situation. The spoken word will have different meanings based upon where and when it is used. Harste et al. explains text as "what is in the learner's head." The close relationship between text and context can be illustrated by the following situation. My way of knowing how to greet people will differ depending upon the context of the situation. The methods incorporated in greeting my parents would be different than those used to greet a total stranger. Text potential, or what has been written, also intertwines with context. A simple case in point would be a multi-meaning word like "bail." If you were reading the story of the Titanic and read the phrase "bail out," you would not think of a prisoner being released from jail.

Using the Child as the Informant

In order to make the best possible judgment concerning curriculum and evaluation, the child needs to be the source of my information. Five basic reasons underlie my belief: 1) I need to know what the child's background knowledge consists of, 2) I need to know what strategies are incorporated in his/her literacy process that are both conducive and detrimental to his/her success, 3) I need to watch the child involved in the process in as natural a setting as possible, 4) the ownership of the process needs to remain with him/her, and 5) I need to test my own educational assumptions as I interact and observe the language user in progress. The best written basal could not give the educator the complete picture of the learner that observing him/her involved in the language process would.

1. Using the Language Learner's Background Knowledge

A few of my students are currently reading about dinosaurs and I am finding out that the fascination with these prehistoric giants spans many grades. The third graders are excited about the unit because the facts are still fresh in their minds from when, as second graders, they had their first formal educational encounter with these beasts. The fifth graders have been stockpiling dinosaur trivia since their own second grade experience. As we read the trade books available, I hear comments like, "See, Mrs. Schoen, I told you there was a dinosaur the size of a

chicken," to "Oh, I didn't realize that some dinosaurs were thought to be warm-blooded. How can they still be called reptiles?" Such comments and questions enable the readers to incorporate their prior knowledge and become actively involved in their learning process. If they weren't asked to use what they already knew to find out what they wanted to know, the new information would not stick as readily. It would hold less meaning for them.

2. What Strategies Are Being Used?

In order to judge the quality of the literacy experience, one must judge the quality of the mental trip taken, not just the arrival (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 18).

The argument that Harste et al. have raised in this quote coincides with my second reason for observing the learner. By focusing only on the product, we will miss out on the "orchestrated literacy decision-making events" (Harste et al., p. 20) of even the seemingly simplest occurrence. After having read a certain predictable text many times over with a group of beginning readers, I wanted to know if they could recognize certain words in context. I asked one reader to find the word "song" in the text "Sing a song together." As I watched, she very carefully read the whole page, pointing to each word as she went. When she came to the word "song," she triumphantly looked up at me. Not only had she used her memory, but she was beginning to understand where one word ended and the next one began. She used the organizational language pattern of the text to help her identify the word I requested. Conversely, a second reader, when asked to complete a similar task, used a process of randomly pointing to words, hoping that one would be right. Both observations of the processes in action told me more than the actual identification of the words, or product.

3. Observing the Language Learner in the Natural Setting

Because language is social, its use must be observed functioning in the natural setting. In order to understand how children read, one must watch them involved in the reading process. The same holds true for writing as well. To decontextualize language and isolate it from the social action results in a pseudo-representation of the process. The transactive element between reader or writer and the written text will have been hampered. We, as educators, need to organize the social environment of the classroom in order to support the language user's efforts in and understanding of reading and writing. Such information cannot be obtained from anything other than watching the learner's process in action.

Cooking was the third graders' reward for understanding a recipe they had read. But first they had to assemble the individual parts of the recipe into some logical format. After discussing what parts they expected to read in a recipe and the purpose of each, the group set out to complete their monumental task. Separating the bits of information between ingredients and directions was easy. The difficulty entered in when the readers began to realize that the directions had to be in order for the recipe to make sense. Discussion was a significant part of this process. Comments heard included, "Well, when I made cookies with my mom, we mixed (creamed) the eggs and butter and sugar together before we added the flour." "This

must be the last step because the sentence starts with 'Finally.'" "You wouldn't roll the dough in a ball after you pressed it down with a fork. That wouldn't make sense!" As I watched these young bakers, I was also observing readers in action in a natural setting, making meaning out of the written text.

4. Ownership of the Learning Process

When the learner realizes that s/he is the focus of our attention, s/he will take more of an active role in his/her learning. The control of the language process will remain with the language user. As the learner becomes aware of the supportive environment that is not focusing on the product, s/he will partake in more risk-taking endeavors as s/he tests his/her hypotheses. S/he will be more open to the demonstrations provided because of the direct link to what s/he is doing in his/her process.

One of the rules of our learning environment is "Give each other a chance!" It has been especially rewarding to watch one reluctant reader emerge from behind her veil of silence when faced with difficult text to actually try different possibilities based upon the context of the story. She needed to know that she was the one responsible for her learning and that there would be time for her to think, time for her to try, and time for her to celebrate her own accomplishments in the reading process. Her learning is occurring for herself and not for what she thinks the teacher is expecting.

5. Testing My Own Assumptions

Finally, as an educator, I am still a learner myself. As I mold my assumptions about the literacy process, I need an arena in which to test them. The learner is my arena. The information s/he gives back helps me rethink my present knowledge base. S/he helps me become a head taller than my current self. As I test my hypotheses through the prism of the child, the process becomes a self-correcting strategy . . . a stepping stone of my own.

In conclusion, using what I know about literacy learning, I can make better decisions concerning curriculum and evaluation if I use the child as my informant. A friend responded to my hypothesis by labeling the informant "Johnny the Rat." Well, I have a lot of Johnnys in my classroom that are very willing to rat on themselves. We all will become more active in our learning because of this.

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