

LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHING OF READING

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(The work of linguists is providing assistance for elementary teachers of reading. Miss Carlson provided a brief survey and suggested some further reading during the state meeting of the English section of the Minnesota Education Association in October. She is consultant in elementary curriculum for the Minneapolis public schools.)

Over the years, we have heard about sight-word and phonic methods of teaching reading. Each has had a variety of interpretations and each has motivated the development of materials for children and teachers. Recently, some new kinds of materials have appeared on the scene with emphasis upon phonemic clues for reading, for example, Words in Color and the Initial Teaching Alphabet. Some materials focus on sequences with small learning increments and immediate feedback of success; for example, the programed materials. Other materials introduce vocabulary and sentence patterns more nearly like children's natural speech; for example, the Bank Street Readers. We are beginning to have an influx of still another type of material which we need to learn to understand and evaluate--the linguistic reading materials.

Linguists, scientifically examining our English language, believe that their observations and generalizations can make the teaching of reading more effective. To understand their points of view we need to look at their definitions of reading.

Fries says:

. . . reading rests upon habits of unconscious identification of graphic shapes that represent the language signals of our language code. . . . Real reading is productive reading--an active responding to all the sets of signals represented in the graphic patterns as they build up, and the carrying forward of such a complete cumulative comprehension as makes it possible to fill in the intonation sequenc-

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es, the special stresses, and the grouping pauses . . . (2: p. 124, 131)

Carroll says:

Reading is the activity of reconstructing a reasonable spoken message from a printed text, and making meaning responses to the reconstructed message that would parallel those that would be made to the spoken message. (1: p. 62)

Lefevre says:

. . . what reading requires is recognition and interpretation of the graphic counterparts of entire spoken utterances as unitary meaning-bearing patterns. (3: p. 652)

Each of these linguists emphasizes the decoding process yet none ignores meaning responses.

Considerable distance remains between reading specialists and linguists when it comes to outlining a schematic plan for teaching reading. But the major ideas presented by different linguists, or the writers who try to interpret linguistics, may have the potential to influence the teaching of reading, to give reading instruction greater depth. These ideas do not characterize any single method but rather suggest possibilities for teaching reading with or without materials that are labeled "linguistic."

Linguistics might make some contributions to reading instruction through:

**a spelling pattern focus to develop independent word recognition skills.

**intonation as an aid to comprehension and effective oral reading.

**understanding and appreciating our English language.

The most publicized and commercialized of the linguistic ideas is the use of regular spelling patterns to teach effective and independent word recognition skills. Letter contrasts or patterns are analyzed visually and audibly. Words representing familiar patterns are woven into story content. Children discover the patterns and develop their own generalizations about them--internalized generaliza-

tions. The writings of Bloomfield and Fries are reflected in many of the materials based on spelling patterns.

But linguistics offers far more than spelling patterns. The intonational signals of meaning--pitch, stress, pauses--help relate the melody of speech to the printed page. A child who changes graphic symbols into natural-sounding speech must understand what he has decoded. Dr. Donald Lloyd, in a paper before a regional council of the International Reading Association, said: "One hour of intonation will do more for your reading than ten hours of word attack."⁵ Word calling and fragmentary word study can be deadly to reading comprehension. Intonational emphases seem quite in contrast to the narrower spelling pattern approaches, but the two as complements might strengthen both word recognition and comprehension skills.

Frequent use of oral reading is encouraged by the linguist. The child hears as well as sees as he makes an oral response to the graphic shapes. His familiarity with the reading vocabulary is reinforced. His verbal interpretation, often accompanied by non-verbal signals, provides the teacher with clues to his understanding, or lack of understanding, of the context.

The linguists encourage us to study our language, to grow in our understanding and appreciation of it. They call our attention to the structure of words, the structure of sentences, and the structure of longer units of meaning. This leads into the study of word origins and derivatives. It leads to observations of the functions and beauty of language. Dialectal differences become interesting phenomena, not handicaps. Experiences with syntactical patterns of sentences and syntactical elements that extend into paragraphs or passages become aids to understanding and appreciating literature.

As materials labeled "linguistic" have arrived on the market, we have tried to examine them and their teaching suggestions. Some of them have been and are being tried in classrooms on an exploratory basis. This year we are part of a field trial of one set of materials that was developed to teach beginning reading. Ten first grade teachers in Minneapolis are using these materials with children from both disadvantaged and more advantaged backgrounds. These materials are based on a total language

approach integrating reading, writing, speaking, listening, and spelling experiences.⁶ Words and concepts are presented and reinforced in three ways: word analysis during the preparation time, word analysis and meaning check in the connected story content, and reinforcement through kinesthetic means during the writing phase.

To simplify the reading task, stories are built with words based on patterns that are phonemically regular. Irregular words are introduced as sight words whenever they are needed for good sentence structure. Children are guided into discovery of important differences between words--visual and sound contrasts. This is a whole word approach. Phonics is internalized by analyzing spelling patterns (what you see) and relating them to word patterns (what you say) rather than blending isolated sounds. What the child decodes makes sense, so the context provides a check on his correctness in decoding. The approach combines sight, sound, and meaning.

In addition to patterns in words, there are patterns in the sentences. The first unit begins with simple sentences, adding sentences with prepositional phrases, sentences with double subjects, and questions. After several units there is a good variety of sentence patterns and some development of literary style. From the beginning, children are urged to group words as phrases and to notice words that signal phrases. Capital letters and punctuation marks become other recognizable reading signals. Intonation contours are emphasized so reading truly becomes a counterpart of speech.

This integrated linguistic approach utilizes the elements of linguistics identified earlier: spelling pattern focus, intonation as an aid to comprehension, learning to understand our English language. Last year we were impressed by both the reading and spelling power developed by some first grade children with limited experiential backgrounds. Some test data will be available this year, but our most significant evidences of successful teaching will be attitudes of children toward reading, the extent to which they self-select and read books from the reading center in the classroom, and the personal stories they create at the chalkboard or on paper.

For Further Reading

1. Carroll, John B. Language and Thought. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964.
2. Fries, Charles C. Linguistics and Reading. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1963.
3. Lefevre, Carl A. "A Comprehensive Approach to Reading," Elementary English XLII (October, 1966), pp. 651-659.
4. Lefevre, Carl A. Linguistics and the Teaching of Reading. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.
5. Lloyd, Donald J. "Reading American English Sound Patterns," Reading Aloud--Language Patterns, Sounds of Words, Interpretation, Proceedings of Chicago Area Reading Association, New York: Harper and Row, 1961.
6. Sabaroff, Rose. "Breaking the Code: What Method? Introducing an Integrated Linguistic Approach to Beginning Reading," The Elementary School Journal (November, 1966), pp. 95-103.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

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