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Child Language Development and the School.

by

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Language is for living with. Children's language emerges from the lives they lead and we cannot hope to make sense of it without understanding their lives. A considerable portion of their day is lived in school and this too becomes woven into their language — it is the particular kind of shared life created by all those who work together in a school which will determine how language will be used by teachers and pupils. However, the discussion of children's language must never lose sight of the context in which it occurs, not simply the immediate spur to speech and writing but the life from which the language draws its meaning and the extent to which the school situation inhibits that meaning or nurtures it. Whatever aspect of language we examine, it is real language being used for real purposes which can invest school with meaning and enable children to turn their increasing flow of experience into connected, usable sense.

The relationship between child and teacher should be based on mutual trust which comes through the establishment, and maintenance, of communication through speech. It is through this speech that most of the learning and understanding is inculcated in pupils: the greater the trust, the greater the communication; and the greater the communication the greater the learning of the pupil.

The Stage of Language Learning Reached by the Child at the Commencement of School (about 5 years)

Regardless of the fact that the pre-school child has never been taught any of the aspects of the structure of language, he has, by the time he commences school, grasped the basic principles of language. Without being explicitly taught the child will know the syntactic sentence, 'I saw a man.' from the non-syntactic sentence, 'Man A Saw I.'. From these internalized rules: phonological, grammatical and semantic, a child, before commencing school, can speak a language. He does this largely by himself, with little, or no formal external language learning.

Indeed, whatever language the child is exposed to, it has its own rules. The child learns those rules internally in his own language. For example, the child subjected to English learns that mug has 3 phonemes m-u-g and trough, t-r-o-f has 4. He knows this subconsciously.

Although the child will have grasped these basic principles prior to commencing school he will not yet have an understanding of what Chomsky calls complex deep structure, e.g. 'John was easy to please'

and 'John was eager to please'. Both these sentences have the same surface structure but their deep structure differs. We can say 'It is easy to please John' but not 'It is eager to please John'.

The child's acquisition of language is subconscious and while his environment may dictate what he learns to say, it does not dictate his ability to acquire the basic structure of language. Each individual's speech will vary.

The Role of the School in the Mastery of the Language by the Native Speaker

Each child brings language to school, and his language demonstrates to his teacher his home atmosphere, often even the educational and cultural level of his family. "It tells us of his own self-image, of his experience, interests and awareness." (Rosen & Rosen, 1973, p. 3.) Thus being in receipt of his knowledge, the school can proceed to prepare a suitable programme that will cater for all children in all situations.

The role of the school then, is to make it possible for children to produce natural, meaningful language; to create an environment in which a rich variety of language can flow with ease, and yet can be used in a rich, varied and confident manner by the children within it. (Rosen & Rosen, 1973, p. 7.)

Thus when a child first begins school, the best means of developing this acquisition of meaningful language is simply to allow children to talk. A young child must have the experiences of talking and the school situation must accommodate and provide for this need. Through talking with others, children learn to share ideas and feelings, linking them through shared experience. Much of this unregulated flow serves not only to teach children about others, but as it knits children together, it makes new kinds of communication possible. Speech is the earliest and easiest learnt way of expressing thoughts and thus children who are encouraged to talk freely in the classroom gain confidence in expressing ideas and, in time, of forming clear and definite opinions.

Apart from talking within the classroom the school can, and should, also provide opportunities for children to play, individually and with others, as a further step to mastering the language. Play is unique in specific ways. The ability of the child to express himself through language in play enables him to gain a true sense of identity which implies the process of self-discovery, self-expression and a communication of self to others. Thus the teacher's perception of her role in the school situation as the encourager of active language acquisition is all-important. She must create situations in which the children will *want* to be involved. If the child is truly involved, he will want to talk. In the security of the situation constructed by the teacher, the child will have the freedom to learn from other models and to explore with confidence. Through the creation of an atmosphere in which children are encouraged to look more closely at things around them then the need to communicate through language is

forthcoming. The child can learn that language is fun, experimenting and exploring language is acceptable, that sharing sounds and speech with others is enjoyable. The child will only gain mastery and confidence in language usage through situations created for excitement, motivation and enjoyment in language. This is a major role of the school.

Once a child has had the experience of using language, the next role of the school to assume in the mastery of language, is to enable the child to be able to organize his thinking so that he makes sense of experience through language. As the possibilities within the school for providing this function are numerous, we will concentrate on two main forms. Language is the child's most natural method of communication with the world around him. The important element in communication is

After having had experience using, experiencing and writing about and with the use of language, children need to be given the opportunity for the adequate development of language competency — through practice in reading. (Flower, 1966, p.12).

All our spoken language is a primary code abstracted from the real world which our words and ideas represent. Written language is a secondary code of visual symbols signifying the primary code of speech. Thus reading incorporates the understanding of basic linguistic concepts and principles, and the decoding of those symbols in written language. Moreover, the child begins this process of reading by encountering his own language and ideas. The problem of how a child enters the world of books and makes the connections must begin with the teachers response both to the children and the book. Reading in the school must be approached in a way in which to construct a *meaningful context* in which the communication skills, speaking, listening and writing can be practised in a way which makes sense to the pupils.

Differences that exist between the Child's Experiences as a Language Learner:

- (a) At home (before commencing schooling),
- (b) At school.

Prior to commencing school the home environment of the language learner is especially important. It is suggested that the child from the advantaged home will have an early advantage in language as he will have experienced greater verbal interchange at home, with descriptions of feelings, tensions and reasons, as against the more arbitrary disciplinary decisions of the less advantaged home. The disadvantaged home often limits communication to immediate desires, for example, the child says, 'I want . . .' and mother's response is probably 'Not now!'. This will obviously have a limiting effect on the range of speech by the child. Praise and encouragement too, by the parent will assist the child in verbalization. Where the mother assumes the role of a helper the child will "bubble" forth happily: if she is authoritarian the child may well "clam-up".

If the teacher fulfils the role of a helper also, and is sensitive, offering reasons, praise and encouragement to her pupils through constant communication, the child's experiences at school as a language learner will differ only slightly from his home experience prior to commencing school. Of necessity, during some activities, he may be restricted in his opportunity for speech, but with his new learning activities he will be able to extend his language.

However, James Britton (Britton, 1973) says that schools are not trying to incorporate the language a child brings from home, but ignore it (thus damaging the child's identity which is embodied in his language), and attempt to make a fresh start. He further suggests that this disassociation (or mis-match) between school and home learning leads to the open hostility evident in secondary schools today.

Joos, an American linguist says:

. . . that the learner has an indefensible right to speak as he likes without school penalties, while the teacher has no rights in this respect but only the duty to demonstrate what usages are profitable in the adult world. (Britton, 1973.)

One difference between a child's experience as a language learner at home and at school, is that at home his mother is more concerned with his morals, for example, 'Say Thank You, Johnny', and his teacher with his intellectual abilities, for example, his reading or spelling. The more personal approach by parents is mentioned by Cazden who says:

Parents, at least when their children are young and language development is most rapid, concentrate on the inner meanings of their child's speech, sure in their conviction that as the child's capacity and need to express more complex ideas grows, so the forms in his language will change accordingly. Teachers would do well to concentrate there too. (Cazden, 1972, p. 137.)

Another difference between a child's experience as a language learner at home and at school, lies in the range of the child's activities. At home his activities may be mother-dominated; include his toys, T.V. and his siblings. When he attends school his range of experiences enlarges to include his new environment, including peers, teachers and his new learning tasks.

It is indeed very necessary and valuable for the teacher to be aware of child language acquisition especially in terms of the way the child learns. She must be aware that a child must firstly have experience of language and thus provide for such opportunities in her planning. She must realize that in order to learn children need experience of the world, to develop a full language ability and mastery. And she must also realize that the possession of the ability to organize his thinking and experiences, and make sense of both through language, is essential to the child's development and mastery of the language. Language enables a child to cope with the world and environment in which he lives. Language enables a child to learn in almost every sense of the word 'learn'. Apart from enabling him

to learn within the academic requirements which the school situation demands, language also enables a child to learn, socially and morally, his position in life.

The teacher cannot afford to underestimate the value of language as a means of learning, of organizing and consolidating our accumulated experience, or the value of language in learning to interact with people and objects in society, nor can she afford to ignore the limits of the role of language in understanding the total pattern of behaviour.

Children rely upon speech for all their wants — to communicate, and since one learns a great deal through talking with others, enquiring and asking questions as well as speaking through writing, then language and learning are closely related and virtually inseparable.

A child's language is the means: in the process of meeting new demands, his language takes on new forms that correspond to the new powers as he achieves them. "By means of taking it in speech we learn to take it in thought." (Britton, 1970, p.114.) "The limits of my language means the limits of my world." (Flower, 1966, p. 52.) Without language we cannot learn, without it we could not explore, express, experience, or communicate to any significant and satisfying degree.

The teacher must also realize the value of the study of child language acquisition in respect to the way members of the family will teach children certain modes of language. The mode of expression of feeling will be different in the home and will affect the children accordingly. Their experience of language and of what language symbolizes will vary. The symbols a child uses in the home will be common to a group. He will not be "taught" these symbols and particular aspects of language, but will come to acquire the particular mode of expression in which he is brought up and continually surrounded by. He is therefore likely to look, bewildered, at the teachers he meets in school, who will not address him in the only forms of language in which he is really at home. His form of language comes to symbolize the relationship within which it is normally employed. It is the prop supporting the framework of beliefs and attitudes that embody the social relationship between himself, his family and his peers.

Thus, an attack by a teacher on a pupil's speech may be regarded by the pupil as an attack on the network of social relations behind that speech. If a teacher wishes a permanent modification of a pupil's speech, she must be aware of the process of language acquisition in children, in order to understand and correct the particular form of language usage.

A child's language arises from his relationship with his family and friends. His language provides the only eye-piece through which he can survey the world. To widen his world view, the teacher needs to give him an additional eye-piece (as it were) in order to ensure that a relationship of a new kind is built up between the child and his teacher. (Britton, 1970, p. 31.)

Here lies the importance and value of the teacher's knowledge of language acquisition in relation to how the mother, father and other members of the home environment "teach" language.

Non-standard language is simply language which does not correlate to the expected speech pattern. Shuy (1973) says that research has found that non-standard speech is inconsistent, and if we talk about the right topics with a child without intimidating him, much of his language will become "standard".

As the child has already acquired the rules for language, drilling of grammar is not appropriate. Rather, it is the teacher's task to develop what the child already knows — extending his language in such a way that he is more easily able to classify objects and his experiences. If the child at school is not pressurized to conform with his language he will be able to complete his phonological and syntactical resources and will naturally extend his vocabulary, and through these his social and intellectual functions. It is important that the teacher should know the systematic nature of language and from her knowledge, study and diagnose the language of the children.

For second practices in teaching English in schools, modern beliefs, as opposed to the traditional beliefs, emphasize whole-task learning. The child, surrounded by mature speech, is encouraged to participate and build his own language system.

Teachers need to know the structure of language; to use language well themselves; to provide a stimulating language environment for the child; to provide opportunity for self-expression and communication; to listen diagnostically to children's language and to direct their oral and written forms implicitly without arbitrary explicit traditional rules.

The term 'language deprivation' does not usually mean the total absence of language resulting from physical or emotional causes, but rather the *condition in which the language exhibited by a person or a group differs from the norms expected by the dominant population*. One would think that language deprivation would be similar to language retardation, but it differs in that it does not indicate the slow acquisition of language. Frozer (1964) states clearly that there are three types of language deprivation:

- (a) The true verbal destitution, which is a characteristic of some children whose opportunity to use language has been so severely limited that they really do have less language than others. An example of this is perhaps a mother who is at work for most of the day and leaves her child in a creche. The child there would be surrounded by children whose language development would not serve as a model.
- (b) Another type of language deprived child is the one whose language is dissimilar from the socially accepted norm valued by the school.
- (c) And the third type would be the one who has had unconceptualized

experience because he has not had the background or experience as has the remainder of his class. He has no occasion to verbalize meaning associated with the experiences that he has had.

The language-deprived child learns his language alone with little or no connection to external speech. Therefore, the deprived child, when entering the school, is confronted by a confusing and strange situation. The language used is completely different from what he has been accustomed to. It is now used to explain, question, to instruct and to predict. Things are unfamiliar and the teacher speaks a different language.

Some children deprived in language do not speak in the classroom situation. Some reasons why this may be so; (a) his language may not be accepted by the school, (b) his language may not be developed in certain areas. The school's attitude towards such children varies enormously and is usually the teacher's attitude. The school's role is vital in helping these children and it is an important responsibility. Whatever method or technique is used, its success largely depends on the sensitivity of the teacher. The teacher should not make the child feel that the language he uses is inferior.

The basic aim of the school in the case of the language-deprived child is to create awareness of possessing language. Such programmes should be taken over a period of time, possibly two or three years, for the gain to be maintained independently thereafter by the child. They need continuous guidance for reasoning to become deeply established. Thus, there is such a person as a language-deprived child, and the school plays a great part in increasing the power of the deprived to deal with this language problem. The teacher's role is important. She should not label her children, for they will become like the label she gives them.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the child's powerful and unremitting concern with language arises out of his need to communicate. It is under this incentive that he rapidly achieves a command of the structures of the mother tongue. The concern in school with the acquisition and development of language is of vital importance. The successful school environment shows what children can do once they are stirred to use language because they have something to say. What schools and teachers have discovered for themselves is that teaching about the workings of language is not the simple business it once was thought to be.

Thus before we can consider the business of turning out pupils who are educated, we must provide opportunities within the school for developing the attitudes and skills which are required for active living – the ability to feel, to think, to communicate by speaking, listening, reading and writing. Our school systems should be based on the need to develop the pupil's abilities and to think independently and logically, and to communicate his ideas fearlessly, accurately and effectively. When the teachers of the children are given, and take, the opportunity to

develop these qualities in their pupils, then those special gifts which individual subjects can give will come flowing in more freely and more abundantly.

As scholars themselves would be first to admit, the process of understanding how children come to master their mother tongue is still at its early stages. As for understanding what does and should happen to children's language in school, that is at an even earlier stage.

What a child does and sees is unique to him, and what he does and sees he communicates; therefore his communication is unique. When these communications occur the child feels free to express himself in his own language and this leads to effective learning. Out of this will grow the language of classification which will enable the child to better organize and relate his experiences.

The excitement of discovery need not be dampened by the problems of 'correct' verbalization. (Barnes, 1969, p 153.)

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