Developmental Considerations in Learning to Read

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Despite the fact that much is yet to be learned about how language is acquired, it is a task most children master with little difficulty and certainly without formal instruction.

Reading, on the contrary, is regarded as a skill which can only be acquired from a teacher with specialized training. Indeed, for generations, educators have debated such issues as the optimal age for teaching reading and the best method for doing so.

Attempts to examine and relate these two modes of communication from a developmental perspective have been few. This article will attempt to apply some of the developmental principles contained in the seemingly more "natural" process of learning language to the process of learning to read.

Importance of a Responsive Environment

First, language is best learned in the context of an environment that is rich in love and acceptance. Even newborn
babies are comforted by the sound of a soothing human voice. In a very short time they learn to respond with cooing sounds of their own. Several months later the child’s first words and simple phrases are a source of joy for parents, regardless of how unintelligible these may be to the rest of the world! Throughout the preschool period parents continue to respond with pride and pleasure to their child’s developing use of language.

For children who are read to this positive association extends to books as well. The situation itself is very special: at storytime — probably bedtime — the parent is giving complete attention to the child; there are none of the normal distractions of the day, and both parent and child are more relaxed and happy than at any other time. Reading is for pleasure, and the parent makes no demands on the child (the child does not have to do a worksheet on sounds, take a timed test or answer questions). However, the young child will automatically ask questions and contribute lively comments. Parents do not say in this, or any other language related activity, “You are not doing your best,” or “You have to try harder.”

The implications for the teaching of reading are obvious. Children need to feel safe, accepted, and unthreatened in the classroom. Fear of failure or worse, ridicule, are enormous barriers to the child who is mastering the act of reading.

Language and Meaning

Second, meaning is at the heart of all language from the earliest months on. It has been observed that when talking to babies, adults (and even slightly older siblings) have a way of speaking which has been termed “motherese.” In motherese, meaning is conveyed through exaggerated intonation and facial expression as well as short grammatically correct sentences which are highly repetitious. Concern is not with ensuring that babies understand the meaning of individual words, but rather that they understand the underlying message, which may be a simple expression of love and affection. One has only to observe the delighted squeals of the baby to see that it is indeed understood!

Later, the first words that a child learns to speak are the names of special people, and objects in his life and words used to effect change such as “no”, “down” and “up” (deVilliers, 1979). Contrary to what people sometimes believe, the child does not first learn words and later attaches meaning to them. Rather, the sequence is just the opposite with the child acquiring words to meet his/her own particular needs and represent quite complex structures (Smith, 1972). As an example of the latter, the simple word “juice” can mean, “I want the juice,” “there’s some juice,” or even “I just spilled my juice.”

Throughout the preschool years, the child continues to be exposed to vocabulary and sentence structure above his/her level of usage, and yet, he/she continues to select appropriate items to learn which are consistent with his/her interests, needs, and developmental stage.

Nowhere is this use of rich, even unfamiliar, but still meaningful language illustrated better than in children’s literature. Much of the language may be unfamiliar to the child, yet he/she understands and loves the story. What he/she is seeking is meaning. What he/she understands is meaning. The parent does not stop to explain every last word to the child who learns that reading means getting sense, not nonsense, from a page. Many children, in fact, teach themselves to read using a much-loved book. The sequence is usually as follows: The child will pick up the book and attempt on his own to retrieve some of the language. This reading-like play rapidly becomes picture stimulated. Often the child will spend more time in play with his/her books than he/she does in listening to his/her parents read the books to him/her; and he/she will stay with the book until it has meaning for him/her. The outstanding feature of this play is the deep meaning it has for him/her. It is also characterized by a kind of “approximation” that goes on in learning speech... with highly appropriate substitutions. At first these approximations are gross because attention is on meaning, not exact words. But gradually the child will look after other items such as surface verbal recall of surface structure. During this process he/she will self-correct, and gradually master different aspects of language — for example, some direct quotations or repetitions, or some unique way of saying something. But always it is the meaning that the child is encoding. Often he/she will make some false starts and repeat him or herself, but these are automatic predictive devices, which act as time fillers while the child is organizing the coming structure. This is a very useful strategy not to be interpreted as inaccuracy or error.

Compare this to what happens in school, where meaning is recognized but often sacrificed to a perceived need to simplify language. The result is often a story that is both inane and unnatural.

Exposure to Models

The third developmental consideration is the role of imitation in learning language. Vocabulary, we know, is acquired through exposure and subsequent imitation. However, language-related attitudes and behavior are also learned. For example, ideally the child sees the important people in his life as lovers of language in all its forms, both written and spoken. He is not only read to but also sees others writing, reading, and conversing intelligently. Several years ago in the course of doing research into how some preschool children teach themselves to read, a nine-year-old boy stated that no one had ever taught him to read, with the following explanation: “My mother didn’t have that much time because she was always reading herself.” That statement revealed far more than the boy realized!

Language and Physical Development

The fourth and final developmental aspect is the strong correlation between biological development and language development. These two occur in almost lockstep fashion, making it possible to make predictions about the child’s stage of motor development by analyzing speech and vice versa. It is, for example, impossible to teach a child to speak in sentences. It is something children do in a highly predictable sequence at a time when they are neurologically ready to do so. Some years ago, a program at a large children’s