

1981

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Recommended Citation

Blass, R. J., Jurenka, N. A. and E. G. Zirzow. (1981). Showing children the communicative nature of reading. *The Reading Teacher*, 34(8), 926-931.

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Showing Children the Communicative Nature of Reading

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This article was originally published in *The Reading Teacher*, volume 34, issue 8, in 1981.

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Showing children the communicative nature of reading

Making a classroom rich in functional print and children's own messages, plus regularly reading aloud to them, helps young readers recognize the purposes of reading. Learning theory supports the techniques.

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Compare these two classrooms: The first one is decorated with commercially produced bulletin boards, games emphasizing fragmented language, cardboard figures depicting a season, lists of spelling words, and penmanship specimens. Stories and language activities produced by children are conspicuous by their absence.

The second classroom shows an abundance of child-centered written work. Notes from the principal to a

child praising good work are found along with thank you letters from one class to another. The reading table is piled with class collections of favorite poems or jokes, experience stories written or dictated by the children, and a scrapbook about safety in the neighborhood.

Each of these classrooms carries a message about written language. The first one tells the children that reading and writing are something done mostly by other people, something that is best handled piecemeal. The second one says that language is communication, whether it's written or spoken, and that we use it to record our own thoughts and give messages to one another.

The classroom environment can stimulate language discovery, can be a responsive communication environment producing successful readers through a natural contact with

the printed word (Teale, 1978). It can show school children something that spontaneous early readers usually have already grasped, namely that written language is a natural alternative to spoken language (Torrey, 1973). Once having discovered that written language says something useful or interesting, children seem to follow a progression of steps toward cognitive clarity that leads them to effective use of phonics, rules, and decoding skills (Fryer, 1976; Forester, 1977).

Some of children's learning strategies help them become aware of the communicative nature of reading and writing. Through appropriate teaching techniques, the teacher can foster this development. This article will identify some of these critical learning strategies and teaching techniques that stimulate them.

Learning theory

Observing young children, Piaget and Inhelder (1969) identified four behavior patterns that indicate representational thought, within which language develops. In order of increasing complexity, they are imitation, symbolic play, drawing or graphic imagery, and mental imagery.

These behavior patterns are based on imitation yet are invented by the child. Language itself, while not acquired by imitation, is acquired within the context of imitation and is transmitted to, rather than invented by, the child. It appears concurrently with but presupposes the prior development of the four behavior patterns.

Through imitation and symbolic play, children assimilate a symbolic language system. Through drawing or graphic imagery, they construct an internal image, which produces mental imagery. They assimilate language as a sign into their system of internal representation. Language, then, derives its personal meaning

from children's internal symbolic system.

As regards written language, we can distinguish between environmental print, such as signs and labels, and text, such as books or personal letters. Environmental print functions much like spoken language: It is intimately related to the situation in which it occurs (Smith, 1979a, 1979b). TV captions and commercials, names on products at the supermarket or in the kitchen cupboard, signs in streets or shopping malls, all operate in the child's immediate world to deliver a message. Children can derive the meaning of environmental print, as they derive the meaning of spoken language, from the situation in which it occurs.

In contrast, text is seldom directly related to the situation in which it occurs. It tends to be abstract in that it refers to situations remote in time and space (Smith, 1979a, 1979b).

While children seem to learn early that environmental print "says something," they become aware of the purpose and function of text only through repeated experiences of being read to from books, magazines, and papers. Indeed, research repeatedly shows that reading to children helps them understand the nature of the reading task and become familiar with patterns of written language. Early readers typically have followed a progression of steps in learning to read: From repeated readings of familiar material, the child memorizes the story, learns to recognize words, and from this word recognition derives phonic values which are used to sound out unfamiliar words (Forester, 1977).

Children seem to internalize and acquire mastery of written as well as oral language through imitation and drawing or graphic imagery. By school age, they are at different stages in this development. Most of them enter kindergarten and first grade with some awareness of the

purpose and function of environmental print. Some, but not all, will be familiar with printed text. Others may enter school still at the "scribble" stage.

While initiating instruction in reading readiness and beginning reading skills, the classroom teacher may wish to incorporate imitation and graphic imagery into lessons. The teacher can also employ a communication oriented approach to reading instruction by using environmental print, reading to children, and providing language experience activities which encourage scribbling as well as drawing and writing.

The following techniques help develop children's awareness of reading as communication.

Classroom techniques

Environmental print. You can establish a classroom rich in environmental print through labeling, writing simple directions and messages, and by taking advantage of the opportunities that occur naturally during daily activities.

First, choose a classroom object for labeling. Encourage pupils to discuss the object in detail—its purpose(s), physical properties, location, and other pertinent information. Then, in the presence of the children, write the label on a strip, using the object's name in a sentence: "This is our piano." Print the label large enough to be seen easily from anywhere in the room. Place the label on or near the object. Direct the pupils' attention to the label several times during the day, and read the sentence aloud to them.

Label no more than one object a day. As new labels are written, some children will begin to recognize words that have been used in previous labels. Some children will read the words correctly and ultimately reach the level of instant recognition. This is the beginning of true sight vocabulary.

In addition to the common practice of posting the names of room helpers, the day, weather, class schedule, and classroom rules and regulations, use print to give simple directions. For example, tell the children that you have listed their names in groups and that one group at a time is to line up for the bus or to go to the lavatory, library, lunchroom, or playground. Post the list so that the children get their directions from print. If you are reading the names for classes of nonreaders, point to each name as you say it.

Write simple messages such as: "Happy Birthday, Joe." "Congratulations, Barbara, on your good work!" "Welcome back, Darrell! We missed you!" "Today we will have a visitor." Encourage the children to write simple messages to the class such as: "I have a new pet." "My cat had kittens." "I lost my pencil." "My grandma came to visit."

Take advantage of the opportunities that grow naturally out of the daily classroom activity. For example, when children gather around a new pet and discuss the feeding schedule, write a chart that tells how much and when food is to be given. Attendance and the daily milk or lunch count can also be posted. To stimulate children's awareness of environmental print, direct their attention to signs along the road, on buildings, in vacant lots, and on shops when taking field trips or walking around the school. Discuss the meaning and importance of the signs.

Reading to children. For some children, the classroom is their first experience with printed text. For the young listener to realize that the language being heard is contained on the pages rather than in the reader's head is a demanding task. The posting and reading of messages from the office, announcements, lunchroom menus, and bus schedules serve as a transition from environmental

print to text. A simple technique at this stage is to point to the words while reading them.

For those children who are just being introduced to printed text, picture books with little or no text as well as short stories with rhythmical, melodious, repetitive phrases and predictable passages are good choices. Discuss the pictures with the children. Repetitive phrases encourage the listeners to participate in the reading. Predictable passages enable them to anticipate the text that is to follow. Most children want to hear favorite stories again and again. Soon they begin to imitate and participate, predicting the story text from picture clues, putting it in their own words.

Once the step of imitation and participation is well established, you may wish to introduce "assisted reading," first by encouraging repetition of recurring phrases, next by omitting recurring phrases and inviting the listeners to provide them. Should the children not respond, you supply the phrase and continue reading.

For beginning readers, supplementing the daily reading lesson with the pleasurable experience of reading all-time favorites offers opportunity for practice. Group together four or five children somewhere in the room where they will not disturb others or be disturbed by them. Let the children sit at desks or at a table on which their books can rest, leaving their hands free to follow the lines of print.

Give each child an identical book. Be sure that it is a familiar, well loved story. If the school is unable to buy duplicate copies of many books, encourage parents to give them, rather than the traditional cake and ice cream treat, as classroom gifts to mark their children's birthdays.

Sit with the children and begin to read from your copy. Invite participation, but never demand it. Make

no effort to have the children memorize the story. As they read along with you, encourage the group to complete larger and larger parts of sentences until they can read the whole story.

The small group provides a supportive environment that promotes a wide range of reading behaviors in various stages of development. Some children will self-correct when their reading does not make sense, sound like familiar language, or sound like expected intonation patterns. Some children will point to lines of print, moving from left to right across the page as they have seen you do.

Be constantly alert and ready to pick up the reading when the group or an individual falters. Hearing themselves read fluently and often enables children to develop awareness of the syntactical patterns of language and the flow of meaning.

Introduce many well known stories to children in this way. Soon they will have an ever increasing library of favorite books from which to select the stories they want to read over and over again.

Language experience activities. Language experience activities show children that written language is communicative and expressive. Dictating stories, children perceive clearly the reason why as well as the way in which an author writes. When reading these stories, they have no doubts that written language tells the reader something.

In addition, the language experience approach provides excellent opportunities for developing concepts such as "sentence," "word," and "writing." Recognizing children's problems in developing these concepts, you will want to use the terms naturally and consistently in the incidental conversations that accompany writing language experience stories. Language experience allows children to observe how words progress from oral language to print;

the use of space between words, punctuation and upper and lowercase letters; and conventions, such as reading from left-to-right, top-to-bottom, one line at a time.

While the idea of personal word banks is not new, it is a technique that can be used with language experience activities. The printed forms of words that have been plucked literally from a child's own speaking vocabulary and used in the context of written sentences become meaningful to the child who generated the words. When a child reads one of his or her own sentences to others, both reader and listener have firsthand experience with reading as an act of communication.

To build a word bank, write each word in the child's sentence on a separate file card. Give it to the child to store. These words can then be used in language experience activities or in simple poetry. They may also be used in word analysis exercises and crossword puzzles.

Generally children at the "scribble" stage experience difficulty with visual discrimination exercises such as identifying, matching, tracing, or copying shapes, letters, or numbers. Encourage the use of scribbling and drawing as a transition from oral to written language.

Tell children who may not be ready to trace or copy their language experience sentences or stories to make one scribble mark for each word. Demonstrate the procedure at the chalkboard. As you say "The boy hit the ball," make a scribble to represent each word that you pronounce. Call attention to the spaces between each scribble mark. The spaces between the words on the written charts clearly mark the boundaries between word units. To further clarify the meaning of word, letter, and sentence, which are interchangeable to some children, frame the individual units with your hands.

Picture writing, using simple stick figures to represent the story or the idea expressed, is another graphic imagery procedure which facilitates the transition from oral to written language. Again introduce and demonstrate the process by simultaneously telling and illustrating a simple story. Children quickly learn to do their own scribble writing and picture writing; the copying of letters and forms will soon follow.

Children can write notes to their classmates. Some will be able to write words. Others will need to copy from their word banks and language experience stories. Encourage those who are not yet able to write words or to copy to use either picture writing or the scribble method. Appoint someone to deliver the mail or set up mail boxes for each child. Let the children read their letters, picture writings, and scribble notes. Allow children who receive picture writing and scribble notes to ask the writer, "What did you say?"

Torrey (1973) identified two key questions as characteristic of the early reader: 1) How does something I say look in print? 2) What does that print say? Learning strategies based on imitation and drawing or graphic imagery, as well as the use of environmental print, reading to children, and language experience activities which encourage the use of scribbling, drawing and writing, will facilitate the generation of these questions by the beginning reader. ■

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Two r's

This is the day we read
them: the street, shaking off
last night's rain, shaggy
with unshaved beards
of the pines; porches that nod
toward each other as if they sent
get well messages
from a safe distance.

Where grass is the path's sequel,
I squat dismembering weeds,
thinking of how all
the instructions about crops
and other mysteries
have to be solved
at least twice.

This morning
birds move through
bare lilacs on signal,
reading the maps of maggot eggs
in the old, thick hides; and cats, lurking
beyond their hedge,
tear through pages of the hunters' code.
Getting rid of them, I heave out
another set of rules.

For, across our house, ivy is
trained away from windows,
we have no shades, and the light
climbing beneath and up over
the edge of thought
slides through or back
in the myths we have written. Write.
Will go on writing.

Judith Neeld, Madison, New Jersey