



Linguistics at School

Language Awareness in
Primary and Secondary Education

EDITED BY
Kristin Denham
and Anne Lobeck

CAMBRIDGE

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Foreword: The challenge for education

Ray Jackendoff

A few years ago, my daughter received a Master's degree in Education from a prestigious and progressive program, and the school district in which she had interned hired her immediately to teach third grade. My pride in her notwithstanding, I was astonished to learn that her training had included nothing at all about the contemporary understanding of language: the structure of English, the systematicity of dialects, the cognitive challenges faced by beginning readers and English language learners, and the sociology of language prejudice – issues that from a linguist's point of view are central to all levels of K-12 education.

By virtue of having grown up with a linguist in the house, my daughter did indeed have some exposure to these issues. But typically, classroom teachers do not. The teaching of the structure of language as part of language arts was largely abandoned in the US twenty-five years ago, so many teachers do not even have a background from their own primary and secondary education, as they do in science and math. Rather, they are simply left to deal with language problems in their classrooms in terms of what they – and their administrators and their students' parents – take to be common sense.

As linguists constantly stress in their introductory courses, people's "common sense" about language is far from accurate. Moreover, it often stands in the way of effective education in speaking, understanding, reading, and writing mainstream English. In turn, command of mainstream English is essential not only for its own sake, but also for success in every other subject, from history to science and mathematics, as well as for success in later professional settings.

For many years, a few linguists here and there have concerned themselves with these issues, collaborating with classroom teachers to try to inject some of the science of language – and the joy of exploring language – into K-12 curricula. Most of these efforts have been rather isolated and small-scale. But in the last decade, a community of researchers has begun to coalesce around the Linguistics in the School Curriculum Committee of the Linguistic Society of America. Many of the same people are also active in the National Council of

Teachers of English, and for some years the two societies have sponsored successful joint symposia.

I am delighted to see in the present volume a cross-section of the exciting work being done in this community, as seen by linguists and also by the teacher educators and classroom teachers with whom they have collaborated.

Several important themes recur throughout the volume. Perhaps the most crucial is how essential it is to validate students' own languages and/or dialects. Many of the contributors stress that teaching mainstream English proves far more effective if the language can be viewed as a tool rather than a threat, intended to supplement rather than supplant students' customary linguistic practices. This change alone makes a major difference to students' growth in competence in the mainstream language, not to mention to their test scores.

Another striking theme is the value of learning about language by playing with it. Students love observing their language, experimenting with it, and comparing it systematically to other accents, other dialects, other languages, to language at home, in the street, in school, and in the media. Encouraging and capitalizing on such creative metalinguistic activity has benefits all across the spectrum, from reading and writing to critical thinking and problem solving.

Which leads to a third theme: The most natural application of linguistics is of course to language arts, where it helps underpin learning in speaking, reading, and writing. But it also can play a valuable role in social studies, where for instance the study of dialects can serve as a springboard for studying social stratification and the history of migration and settlement. Furthermore, the science of linguistics can serve as a low-tech example of empirical investigation and scientific theory-formation, in which students can find the data all around them, free for the picking.

Many of the projects discussed here are collaborations among a small group of linguists and teachers. The challenge they pose is how to extend their benefits to a larger cohort of students. There obviously can't be a linguist in every classroom. At least three tasks have to be addressed in tandem: winning broader public acceptance of these approaches to language teaching; creating self-standing classroom materials that teachers can use without the intervention of a partnering linguist; and finding ways to train teachers in the use of such materials, whether through schools of education, inservice workshops, or the internet. None of these three can really succeed without the others. Yet it can be done, as shown by the large-scale integrated language curricula in Great Britain and Australia, also presented in this volume.

An important key to these goals is getting teachers on board. On their own, linguists cannot develop K-12 curricula in language arts, social studies, and science. Teachers and teacher educators must be collaborators throughout the process. It will not be easy. Teachers often find they must overcome their own linguistic prejudices and insecurities. In addition, they face enormous pressures,

from parents, administrators, and even from state assessment requirements, to maintain the traditional approach to language study. But, as the chapters in this book show, with teachers and linguists working together, it is possible to shift language study to an approach informed by the science of natural language. Teachers who have learned to deal with language from this new perspective love it, and their students thrive.

All these issues came to the fore in a 2006 workshop on Linguistics in Education at Tufts University, co-hosted by the Center for Cognitive Studies and by Maryanne Wolf's Center for Reading and Language Research. The participants included many of the contributors to the present volume. The excitement generated by the workshop led to new collaborations and to a series of follow-up workshops organized by Anne Lobeck and Kristin Denham, some of whose fruits appear here.

The overall goal of these efforts, of course, is to benefit our children and our society through the better teaching of language. The publication of this book is an important step toward this goal. I hope readers will be inspired to join the effort.

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Introduction

Kristin Denham and Anne Lobeck

Over the past thirty years, research in linguistics has led to a deeper understanding of language, and linguists have developed better analytic tools for describing the structure of words, phrases, and discourses – better theories of grammar. The scientific study of language, linguistics, has provided us with greater understanding of how languages are acquired, how they develop over time and space, what it means to be bilingual, how languages are similar to each other, and what accounts for their differences, among many other aspects of this uniquely human phenomenon. Nevertheless, the advances of linguistic science have remained largely confined to the academy, and many of us who teach linguistics still find that our students know very little about language. This lack of knowledge of language is unfortunate but not surprising; though some teacher education programs include courses on linguistics, linguistics is not comprehensively integrated into teacher education, and is thus largely absent in the K-12 curriculum. The chapters in the book show, however, that this tide is starting to turn; linguists are becoming more and more active in K-12 education in a variety of productive ways. You will also see from the chapters in this book that there is no “right” way to integrate linguistics into K-12 education. If we do have one message, it is that we linguists can’t do this alone; we need to collaborate with practicing teachers and work in partnership toward the common goal of improving language education.

The need to bridge theory and practice

Much research has been conducted to identify ways in which raising awareness of language can be of use to K-12 teachers, and thus of benefit to their students. For example, the study of sentence structure (syntax), word formation (morphology), sound patterns (phonetics and phonology), and meaning (semantics) can aid in understanding and analyzing oral and written language (and sign language). Knowledge of syntax, phonology, and morphology deepens understanding of and provides tools to analyze distinctions among literary genres, stylistic choices, and cultural literacies, spelling patterns and irregularities, accent and pronunciation, etymology and vocabulary.

Knowledge of these fundamental areas of linguistics can be an important tool in analyzing reading and writing development and patterns of error. Knowledge of semantics, pragmatics, and discourse helps teachers identify and understand different conversational patterns and narrative structures (in oral, written, and signed language). Knowledge of differences in cross-cultural conversational practices can be of use in mitigating miscommunication that impedes learning. Knowledge of language acquisition can be applied in analyzing developmental patterns in writing and literacy in both first- and second-language readers and writers, and can help teachers distinguish between actual language disorders and what are perceived to be disorders that can in reality be attributed to second-language learning or dialect difference. Knowledge of language change and variation helps teachers respond in informed ways to differences between academic and home speech varieties in reading, writing, and speaking. Understanding that language varies and changes systematically helps situate “standard” and “non-standard” varieties of English in the classroom in reasoned rather than discriminatory ways. Studying language change and variation deepens our understanding of language as a dynamic system, expressed by shifts in word meaning, syntax, and pronunciation (the latter reflected in the English spelling system). Studying language as a social tool helps dispel myths and stereotypes based on language and fosters linguistic equality in an increasingly multicultural society. (See research compiled in Denham and Lobeck 2005; as well as in Adger, Snow, and Christian 2002; Baugh 1999; Wheeler 1999a, 1999b; Andrews 1998, Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Smitherman 2000; Delpit 1988; among others)

Educators are also acutely aware of the need for language study, though the goals for its integration and implementation in the classroom are typically different from those of linguists. These goals include accountability requirements that demand that students demonstrate high level literacy skills (Abedi 2004), an increased focus on writing which calls for expert control of text and sentence structure, as well as vocabulary, and state assessments that demand expert reading skills. Further, although some of the unique linguistic demands associated with the content areas have been identified (e.g., Lee and Fradd 1996; Abedi and Lord 2001), educators’ lack of understanding of language leads to inaccurate assessments of and responses to English language learners and other students whose academic language skills lag behind their social language skills (Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, and Christian 2004; Heath 1983; Short 1994). Improving teaching and learning for these students often involves revising linguistic practices, texts, and knowledge about second language learning (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2004). In addition, the possible role of dialect differences in the persistent achievement gap between Black and White students is often mentioned but

not well understood. Indeed, there is a high degree of politicization with respect to language use in school about which the public, including teachers, is often naive, as witness conversations during the Oakland Ebonics controversy that referenced myths about dialects more often than scientific information (Vaughn-Cooke 1999). Teachers therefore need a broad understanding about the structure of language and its use to help their students understand how language works so that they can use it well for reading, writing, and speaking in the increasingly multicultural and multilingual classroom (Fillmore and Snow 2002). Nevertheless, though widely used English Education textbooks in the US (Christenbury 2000; Atwell 1998) include chapters on dialect diversity and discuss the value of home language, it appears that primary and secondary teachers continue to rely on traditional approaches to language, approaches that are inconsistent with what we now know about language structure, variation, change, acquisition, and use as a social tool.

Some roadblocks

Given linguists' and educators' joint commitment to the importance of the study of language in the K-12 curriculum it is perhaps surprising that research in linguistics has had only a minimal impact on school teaching. The reasons for this state of affairs are complex. Linguistics is a donor discipline to English language arts. In addition to supplying knowledge about the subsystems of language, it has helped to shape the knowledge base on reading, writing, speaking, and listening (e.g., Farr and Daniel 1986; Labov 1970; Wolfram, Adger, and Christian 1999). But the connection between linguistics and English language arts has not been as strong as it should be, particularly with regard to grammar, a language process that underlies language production and comprehension. Linguistics' decades-long focus on generative syntax (e.g., Chomsky 1965, 1981, 1995) has had little impact on grammar study in colleges of education and in schools. Linguistics and English language arts have had different views of what grammar is and should be, and different goals for its use. Linguists have sought to build a grammar that would be adequate for describing the language, and English language arts has sought to apply a grammar that is already constructed. It is perhaps not surprising that there continues to be longstanding debate over the efficacy of teaching grammar in primary and secondary school, based on early controversial studies that claimed that grammar teaching was ineffective in teaching writing (see discussion cited in Hartwell 1985 and, for updates, Weaver 1996). Connections between linguistics and other curricular areas (history, social studies, science) are virtually non-existent, largely because of the public resistance to identifying linguistics as a science, and because, with a few