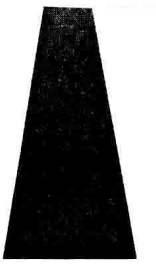
LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

The Home and School Years

Second Edition

Terry Piper



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To the memory of my dear friend

Gail Davis Harkavy

whose intellect inspired me, whose sense of humor delighted me,

whose love sustained me, and whose daughter provided

delightful data on language learning.

Preface

This book is about children's language acquisition from the time they are born throughout the years of schooling. It is also about and for teachers. This is not a methods text; it is a foundational book about how children learn language, how we teach it, and how these two processes are sometimes at odds. It tracks language acquisition from birth through the school years, using the experiences of a number of different children to exemplify stages and sequences of development.

No author ever escapes bias, and I will declare both of mine here on the first page. The first is my belief, based on research and experience, that there are more similarities than differences between first and second language acquisition. There are undeniable parallels, and these should not be overlooked in the classroom. You won't find a chapter at the back of this book telling you what to do about ESL children in your classrooms. In this book you will find some separation but largely you will find the description and discussion integrated. You will meet several children whose stories inform and exemplify the language processes. Lucy, Janet, Quy, Michael—these are all children I knew and worked with. Jani, I did not know, although I know enough of her story to regret that I did not.

My second bias is related to the first. Although I am a lifetime advocate for public education, I am also convinced that we have failed when we need not have. The approach of generations of educators, particularly on the North American continent, has been to change the child. When children fail at school, the reason often given is that they aren't "ready" or that they came from "disadvantaged" homes. When we fail in our efforts to teach children to read and write, we blame the child or home. Then we set up programs to try to change the child to fit the mold of the school. This has always struck me as strange. Why do five-year old children have to bear the responsibility for their failure when it is completely out of their control? The people who *do*

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have control of the materials, the teaching, and the curriculum do not bother to try to fix the school to meet the needs of the child; they are too busy trying to "fix" the child to fit the school. And mostly they fail.

This failure is most obvious in literacy. Even at the end of the twentieth century, when we should know better, I hear educators blaming everyone but themselves for what appears to be a falling literacy rate. Parents, television, social breakdown, poverty, computers. Everything but education. Of course, all these factors greatly influence children's ability to learn, particularly if we persist in using our traditional methods, and we would be foolish to ignore them; but unless educators assume full responsibility for educating children just as they are, then we won't make much progress. This is my belief and it permeates the book, particularly the last few chapters.

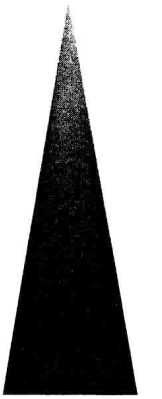
The language and learning of every child is the rightful concern of teachers, and the more teachers know about first and second language acquisition, the better able they will be to plan for effective education for every child they meet. I have sought to achieve a balance between theory and practice, between first and second language acquisition, between showing and telling. It is the book I wrote for myself as an educator of teachers, and I hope that other teachers and future teachers will find it useful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first and biggest debt of gratitude is to Susan Hicks, my secretary and friend, who protected me from intrusions and who formatted the thousand pages of the manuscript. I know that there were times that she was "poisoned with" the job, as they say in Newfoundland, but she kept smiling. I cannot begin to thank her properly either for her work or for her sunny disposition. I am also grateful to Bernadette Power, my very able executive assistant, who shouldered more of the work load than she should have during the time I worked on this book, and to Elizabeth Maddox whose willingness to help out in so many ways made my life and writing so much easier. My research assistants at Memorial, Colleen Hickey and Susan George, spent more hours in the libraries, the one with books and the virtual ones, than I ever could have. For that I am indebted. I must also thank the faculty members who kindly overlooked my occasional lapses in attention to their concerns. Although it was several years ago and they have both moved on in their careers, Kim Rebane and Chris Grant made a substantial contribution to the research that gave me the descriptions of Lucy, Quy, and Michael. By being the best teacher I've ever encountered, Mary Kennedy of Calgary, Alberta, gave me inspiration and hope for the future of education. She also helped to shape my views about the education of children.

I would also like to extend my thanks to the reviewers of the second edition manuscript: Marion Crowhurst, University of British Columbia; Trevor J. Gambell, University of Saskatchewan; Maria J. Meyerson, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Beverly Otto, Northeastern Illinois University; and D. Ray Reutzel, Brigham Young University.

And finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of Jaap Tuinman, my mentor and "boss," who has always talked sensibly with me about the business of education.



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CHAPTER ONE

Why Is Language Special?

The following sentence appeared in the first paragraph of the first edition of this book:

> In most elementary teachers' daybooks, time for language arts is blocked in alongside arithmetic, science, and social studies, and it is what goes on in that period of time which is the concern of most college or university methods courses in language.

While a great many primary and elementary teachers still divide the children's day in this manner, many have also experimented with and adopted the integrated approach to organizing their curricula. I'll take this up in more detail in Chapter 10, but the integrated curriculum deserves mention right here on page one because, as you will see, it represents a significant step toward creating a school environment that parallels children's real-life experience of language. In attempting to break down the traditional subject area boundaries, teachers have recognized that children's real-life learning is not segmented into artificial units or categories of study but is a seamless journey of enquiry. They have also begun to realize that the true uniqueness and potential of language in children's lives does not lie in the additional 10 minutes it may have warranted in the traditional school day.

One of the things that makes language special is that while it *can* be a rather fascinating subject of study, it is also a prerequisite for the study of all other subjects. To put it very simply, "The talk that students engage in during school lessons goes far to shape what they learn" (Barnes, 1995, p. 2). Language is the foundation to thinking about and learning math, or science, or social studies, and in this respect it is unique. Language plays a central role in children's learning because it is a partner to those central mental processes of perception, comprehension, attention, memory, and that

somewhat amorphous activity we call thinking. I am not exaggerating to claim, in fact, that children's success in school depends to a very large degree on their facility with the four modes of language—listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The converse is not true, of course. Although language is needed to study other subjects, children do not require prior facility with math, science, or any other subject area before they can learn language. There are prerequisites, of course, cognitive as well as social, and we will examine these more closely in Chapters 4 and 6, but it is obviously and significantly true that children need not be conversant with theories of mathematics or even know how to count before they learn the language of counting. Rather, they learn basic counting concepts *as they learn* the language for counting. This is true of much of children's learning—the concepts and the language required to talk about them are learned simultaneously.

When children begin school, they have already begun the lifelong task of acquiring language. This is true of the other subjects in the curriculum in only a very rudimentary sense. More significantly, they have acquired their language without being taught. Children learn a great deal about the world without being formally taught by others, but they are able to do so in large part because they ask questions, they hear people talking, and, eventually, they read about their world and others' experience of it. In short, they rely on language for their learning. This cognitive basis of language makes it unique, whether it is a discrete subject in the school curriculum or, more appropriately in my view, integrated into a seamless web of learning. There are other unique characteristics of language, of course. I have identified five other attributes that are especially important to our understanding of the importance and uniqueness of language. I begin with the fact that language belongs exclusively to humans because in justifying that claim, I must provide at least a rudimentary definition of language. Since language is the subject of this book, it seems appropriate to begin by being very clear what we are talking about.

LANGUAGE IS UNIQUELY HUMAN

Language belongs exclusively to human beings. I know that in writing such a blunt statement I run the risk of offending animal lovers, some of whom are convinced that their pet dog (cat, pig, hedgehog) speaks more sense than some of their relatives. If this is true, then it is more a comment on the content of their kinfolk's discourse than it is on the pet's linguistic abilities. Certainly, some animals have systems of communication, but these differ from human language in fundamental ways.

Human language has many attributes, but for the purpose of comparison with animal communication, three are definitive. First, language has **semanticity.** It conveys meaning through its capacity to represent ideas, objects, and events with symbols. Second, human language is **productive.** Speakers can understand and produce utterances they have never heard before, and they can also create new utterances by recombining elements they already know. In other words, in acquiring a language, speakers acquire the ability to generate new and unique utterances, with no limit on the

number of original utterances they can create. Third, human language, as opposed to other communication systems, has the capacity of **displacement,** meaning that it can be used to create messages that are not tied to the immediate environment. Many animals have the ability to communicate in some limited ways. For the purpose of comparison we will look briefly at how bees and jackdaws communicate and how this differs from human language.

The **waggle dance** has been studied by scientists of many different disciplines in attempts to understand the functions it serves and to compare it with the functions of language in humans. Bees use the waggle dance to tell other bees the direction and approximate distance to the nectar they have discovered. The information is contained in the movements of the bee's dance. A westward movement tells the other bees to move west, a round dance consisting of alternating circles to the left and right indicates that the source of nectar is near, and tail-wagging tells them that it is farther away. Dancing bees don't lie about the direction or distance to the flowers, and presumably, the "listeners" don't misunderstand. Neither do dancing bees, nor the bees in their audience, comment on the quality of the nectar or hazardous flying conditions. They do not introduce any other topic of conversation or wander off topic. They communicate a particular kind of information that all bees understand. Their message is **iconic,** meaning that it looks like what it is conveying, and it is always located within the context of nectar-gathering. While it does have limited semanticity, it fails on criteria of productivity and displacement.

Jackdaws, relatives of crows, have three kinds of calls. One is the mating or courting call (self-explanatory, I think). Another is a call they use when they fly away, and the third is a warning call used before attacking any creature carrying a dangling black object. Like the dance of the bees, the communicative call of the jackdaw has meaning to its users (and thus some semanticity), but it is very strictly bound to the context of the present, failing on the criteria of displacement and productivity.

Many animals besides bees and jackdaws have communication systems. Whales, dolphins, sticklebacks, gibbons and meadowlarks (not to mention the family dog) have also been found to possess intricate ways of communicating. But none meets the three basic criteria that define human language. Not even chimpanzees, far closer to humans on the evolutionary scale, have more than an extremely rudimentary capacity for symbolic representation.

As interesting as it is to speculate on animal language and to compare human and animal communication systems, for teachers, other attributes of language are perhaps more relevant, particularly the fact that language is linked to cognition.

LANGUAGE IS LINKED TO COGNITION

It is almost impossible to study human cognition without considering language, although psychologists have been a little slower than linguists to recognize this link. Language and cognition are not the same, of course. Some cognitive development is

possible without language, but from the time children begin to acquire language, it affects all aspects of their mental development. Vygotsky (1962) would claim, for example, that speech and thought have different roots and develop independently of one another up to a particular point. At this point, thought becomes verbal and language becomes rational (p. 44). When children develop rational language, they use it not only to express their needs but also

> to manipulate their perceptions of the world by mentally manipulating language . . . . In the process, the perceptions themselves are sorted into categories that are available in the language. Thus, the language to some extent structures the child's developing life-view.
>
> *(Smith, Goodman, & Meredith, 1976, p. 15).*

This is not to say that children cannot or do not think without language but that language becomes the principal means of thought.

Linguistic and cognitive growth occur in tandem and influence each other in complex ways that make them inextricable. Learning, in short, comes to depend on language as we use it to organize our thinking and actions. We use language to shape our experiences, to store our experiences, and to reshape them when we recall them from memory. We talk our way through difficult tasks (and some that are not so difficult), we talk aloud to clarify our thinking, and, indeed, to find out what we think. Through language we share and increase our experience and learning. As teachers, we rely on children's language to tell us what order they see in the world and what sense they are making of their experience of living in it.

When I talk about how language is linked to cognition, I refer not only to oral language but to reading. Dickinson, Wolf, and Stotsky (1989) observe that "Reading represents one of the most interesting and cognitively complex systems and, as such, has a great deal to teach us about cognition in general" (p. 231). Children's reading and writing are, in a very real sense, extensions of their oral language. They bring their life experiences, shaped first by oral language, to the task of learning to read and write, and so that learning is also cognitively driven. Another sense in which written language is linked with cognition is in children's learning of it. In learning to read and to write, they are active participants. Indeed, we have known for some time that children in Grades 1 and 2 are capable of assuming responsibility for their own learning to read and write (see Hansen, 1983, for example). We have also come to view reading and writing, like oral language, as essentially processes of the interactive construction of meaning (Tierney & Pearson, 1984, p. 68). Once they have learned to read and write, children can use written language in much the same way as they use oral language—to shape, store, and recall experience. Reading is one of our most important ways of increasing our experience. For those of us who love to read, "Some of our best memories never happened," (with apologies to Frank Zappa).

In Chapters 8, 9, and 10, I will talk more about the role language plays in learning, first outside the school as children unencumbered by the formal requirements of schooling learn to use language in a variety of social contexts; and then as they encounter literacy and other less contextualized language demands of schooling.

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