

Key Generalizations About Language and Children

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From the mid-1960s we have learned a great deal about the development of children's grammar and their systems of sound, word formation, and meaning. And during the past half dozen years we have gained major insights into how children learn to use language to communicate in different contexts.*

Some of the findings in the study of children's language are mostly descriptive and either quite technical or highly general. Their primary value appears to be in providing a theoretical base for generating workable research hypotheses for other psycholinguists. Much of the contemporary work in language pragmatics falls into this category, for example, Bernstein (1960), Halliday (1973), and Tough (1977).

Other research findings, however, yield specific information with direct implications for day-to-day classroom instruction. And a considerable body of the research provides important perspectives and directions for policy formulation as well as curriculum design.

* This is not to imply that important work did not go on earlier. In fact, considerable study took place in Russia, for instance, in the 1920s-30s under the general leadership of Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues. However, this work was not available to the West until 1962 when his *Thought and Language* was published in translation. *Mind in Society*, a collation of additional Vygotsky work, was published in 1978.

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Ironically, few of these new insights have found their way into the current curriculum and instructional scene. With the exception of attempts to build transformational grammar into basal language arts instruction (attempts which appear to be largely unsuccessful, by the way), few curriculum materials reflect the theory and research I am talking about here. There are references to language development studies in some basal reading series, but there is little specific content derived from language development research in the readers themselves.

In spite of this limitation, reading instruction is the curriculum area where psycholinguistic findings receive the greatest attention. For example, work by Yetta and Kenneth Goodman and their colleagues in reading diagnosis and instructional strategies is used in a number of reading programs around the country.

Why the negligible impact of research findings on curriculum and instructional practices and policies? There are several reasons. First, language acquisition and development studies have yet to be effectively translated into usable form. Most studies are highly technical and written in a fashion understandable only to those with training in the field. Some background in linguistics and psychology is essential for interpreting and applying this work. The materials that are accessible to the nonspecialist do not address the practicalities of teaching or curriculum design. They merely translate the technical information for general consumption.

In addition, the most important findings in language development are those related to the knowledge and skill the teacher brings to teaching rather than to the design of specific instructional materials. What is im-

plied, then, is need for attention to staff development for professional improvement.

As a first and essential step, I am suggesting seven key generalizations for discussion. Each generalization should be considered first for specific implications for classroom instruction. What activities, teaching techniques, and strategies are called for, if the generalization is valid? If the generalization is questioned, on what grounds is the questioning based? What alternative seems more appropriate?

The generalizations should also be considered from the point of view of instructional policy formulation and decision making. What position should be taken? What characteristics of the generalizations should be reflected in districtwide goal statements? Curriculum design? Budget?

Generalization 1.

Language is acquired in orderly stages, each with its own generalized governing principles. This includes grammar, sound system, word formation, and meaning development.

Children do not learn language by simply imitating adults, nor do they acquire language accidentally. Instead, they develop language systematically with the system becoming more complex and language use more elegant through the years. Each of the various stages of development from beginning of speech through the beginning school years reflects attributes common to all children in the stage. Many of these attributes are, of course, different from adult language, often in significant ways. For example, overextension of the "ed" inflection to inappropriate verbs is common in the grammar of many kindergarteners and first graders. "I falled down" or "I hurted my knee" are normal language uses at that stage.

Using these general statements as a starting point, educators should consider the implications for instruction.

"Because" is used as a coordinating conjunction rather than in a cause-effect role by children through the second grade. Through the primary years animistic verbs are used with inanimate nouns: "the sun *chases* the clouds" or "the boat *wants* to go on the lake." These characteristics of children's language are perfectly normal and appropriate.

Although children enter school with comprehension and production vocabularies beyond what many would assume and, further, have for the most part mastered the basic grammar needed for speech, the fact remains that many important language skills will not appear until much later. Expressions including "if-then" conditionals and contrary-to-fact subordinating conjunctions (although, even though, in spite of) do not appear in children's language until after age ten or eleven.

Therefore, language development instruction and materials must be carefully geared to the child's stage of language development.

Generalization 2.

Although the four general language skill areas—speaking, writing, reading, and listening—assist each other in many ways, they remain largely independent in other ways.

Recent research reviews suggest that educators have overemphasized the interrelationships between speaking, writing, reading, listening (Groff, 1977, 1978). Although many, perhaps most, psychologists, linguists, and developmentalists perceive strong relationships between the language producing and consuming domains, few would go as far as to assert that good writers will necessarily be good talkers.

Programs in each of the language skill areas ought to capitalize on other language skills when appropriate. It would seem that a most productive

approach would be to design curriculums which specifically focus instruction on each of the four language skill areas.

Generalization 3.

Comprehension normally exceeds production.

Most children enter school with a comprehension vocabulary two or more times the vocabulary they use in oral communication. In addition, they are able to understand language couched in more sophisticated and complex grammar than they can produce in their own language. The gap between comprehension and production shrinks as the child approaches the intermediate grades, but, of course, never closes completely.

This should be kept in mind, especially in the early grades. With contemporary interest in early diagnosis and screening, this generalization is particularly important.

Generalization 4.

Language never operates independently from meaning or function.

Children from the earliest ages learn language as they learn its function (Fillion and others, 1976). For the child, language is a tool whose purpose and potential develop in concert with syntactic and semantic facility. Children, for example, learn to use the language of direction at the same time they learn that language serves a management and control function. Children as young as three or four use language in cause-effect relationships when circumstances call for persuasion (Tough, 1977).

It is not difference in language function that separates the mature from the developing language user as much as it is difference in quality and degree of sophistication of the various functions. For example, preoperational children use a range of cause-effect language; however, they are

transductive reasoners who use neither the deductive nor inductive modes usually associated with rational thought.

Structuring talk environments for the elementary school child requires then a sense of language use types and communication functions accessible to the child and, more important, a particular sensitivity to the mesh of the two at various stages of the child's development (Klein, 1979).

Generalization 5.

Language helps to instill beliefs as well as to communicate them.

Children by age seven or eight, perhaps before, are sensitive to the relationship between the way one uses language and the character of the individual using the language (Labov, 1970; DeStefano, 1978). Light (1979), for example, reveals that eight-year-old children use dialect attributes to form beliefs about the nature and personal makeup of others without knowing or perceiving what most of us prefer to think is critical information. Essentially they react negatively to those who speak differently, whether the difference lies in a regional dialect or in words, accents, or prosodic features of a second language.

It is important to note that children from age seven to nine, though beginning to form stereotypes of people who don't talk as they do, are not locked into stereotyping (Light, 1979). They are receptive to instruction that looks at language and language use from a neutral and objective perspective. Teachers, through careful instruction, can help reshape the learners' attitudes about language and its use, as well as their responses to people using the language.

Generalization 6.

Different social contexts require dif-

ferent language structures and forms. Teachers do not use the same language in the faculty lounge that they use in the classroom. Professional speakers do not address an audience of lay people the same way they would a professional group. Children do not speak the same way on the playground that they do in the classroom. Indeed, sociolinguists have long noted that all normal language users employ different language in different contexts (Joos, 1962; Perin, 1970; Warner, 1960). Effective language users are not those who speak "correctly" as much as they are those who speak "appropriately."

Knowing how and when to adjust the structure and form of language to the situation is one of the most critical language skills to be developed. Since children grasp this intuitively early in the school years, it would seem that instructional strategies and techniques should be developed to aid communication adjustment skills. (See Klein, 1977, 1979; and Wood, 1977, for curriculum development approaches).

Generalization 7.

Using language assists cognitive development.

There are at least three functions of language. It is an important mode for the transmission of information, and in self-expression it is a critical part of our individuality. A third function is that it assists in cognitive development. Using language enables us to restructure mental schemata, perceive reality in new ways, and redesign the strategies we employ to attack problems.

A major body of research developed over the past 50 years (primarily by the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, his students and followers) points to language in social interaction as critical to effective cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1978). In the 1930s, Vygotsky observed the importance of social communication in the developing child, the alteration of egocentric speech to an inner speech for the school-age child, and the important joint use of these two language modes for the individual in dealing with circumstances and problems requiring more advanced cognitive skills. More recent work by sociolinguists M. A. K. Halliday (1973, 1975) and Joan

Tough (1973, 1977) reinforce Vygotsky's work and provide new insights on the degree of linguistic sophistication children possess in attacking cognitive problems.

Children have greater skill in using language for communication and cognition than we have presumed. Though their levels of sophistication and sense of varying strategies within language functions are not as great as adults, their intuitive grasp of the potential of language for diverse roles is solid.

Staff Development

Using these seven generalizations as guides, it might be worthwhile for teachers to produce others that are important. In small groups, teachers might then discuss the generalizations and give their own interpretations, offering additional examples to illustrate the validity of the generalization or counter examples which question the validity.

After consensus is reached on a generalization, it would be appropriate to identify the implications for curriculum and instruction. For example, one might propose from the first generalization that kindergarten and first grade teachers should accept the language the child brings to school initially and that strategies designed to improve the quality of that language should derive from modeling rather than correction.

Or, one might propose from the fourth generalization that vocabulary instruction should consistently incorporate linguistic context and that individual words should seldom be taught in isolation.

Another useful activity is role play. Given the series of generalizations and support data, the group could produce a list of statements or assertions which might constitute an official school policy on language instruction. Follow-up discussion would then address the implications of such a policy and how it would be expressed to parents and the community, with specific illustrations.

The primary staff development goal is the enhancement of a personal perspective on language and language use by children which is realistic, practical, and sensitive to the human nature of this fundamental expressive mode. This is a first step to improved language instruction in our schools. ■

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