

The Rediscovery of Language in Education

Guest Editorial

ROGER W. SHUY

One of the most exciting developments in education is renewed interest in language learning. America has always had immigrants who spoke many languages. It has always had speakers of regional and social dialects. But our country somehow forgot this rich linguistic heritage and even went so far as to pretend we were all monolingual and monodialectal and that learning to read and write could be accomplished by studying bits and pieces of English.

Education has become enamored of the processes used by the physical sciences and has been applying a reductionist approach (part to whole, skill building) to teach reading, writing, and speaking in both first and second languages. Architects have long understood that form follows function. Educators saw the forms of language, the sounds, and the words, but forgot about the functions underlying and preceding them. There is probably no better metaphor for this than the "tip of the iceberg."

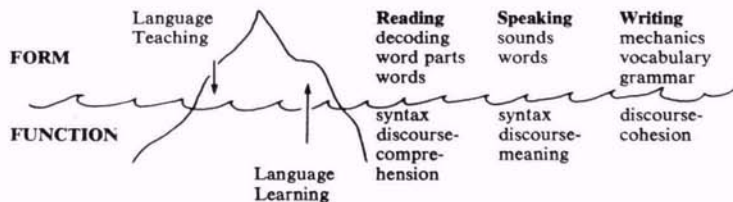
Educators, particularly language educators, have looked too long at only the surface. This is partly because of the national mania for standardized test measurement in which the little pieces of language—the sounds, the letters, the words, the spellings—have been so emphasized that we forget why they are there. They are the easiest to see and the most convenient to quantify, so we measure them and pretend they represent real language learning. It all seems so scientific, just like the real sciences appear to be.

What we forget is that a child learning to talk moves from beneath-the-surface functions toward the learning of language forms. Such

functions are now being referred to as "using language to get things done," including such functions as requesting, denying, persuading, interrupting, and seeking clarification (probably the single most important skill to be acquired by any learner).

A focus on such functions is at the heart of a holistic, nonreductionist approach to reading, writing, and first/second language teaching. Without it we run the risk of turning out a generation of children who can decode but not comprehend, who can spell but not write, or who develop a vocabulary but are not able to speak the language well enough to get things done with it. The curious thing about this rekindled interest in language through holistic learning is that it mimics the extremely effective method used by babies as they learn their native language and by foreigners who, from circumstance, are forced to immerse themselves in the everyday existence of a new language. The paradox of language learning and language teaching can be also seen in the iceberg metaphor (see figure). Traditional language *teaching*, whether speaking, writing, or reading, goes from form to function while natural language *learning* is just the reverse.

We are at a significant turning point in language learning knowledge. Theorists and researchers, such as those represented in this issue, are telling us that education's search for accountability through national testing has led us astray. We have been teaching and measuring the wrong things and in the wrong direction. Daryl Huff's book, *How to Lie with Statistics*, had as its major theme, "If you can't prove what you want to prove, prove something else and pretend it's the same thing."



Couple this with the long-held educational value on quietness over noise and the cherished notion that making mistakes is bad and to be avoided at all costs, and it is not too hard to see how we got where we are. There is no way to learn a language without using it in a meaningful way, without a natural, functional context, without making noise in it frequently, and without making mistakes in it. It is time for a functional, self-generated, interactive use of language in education which helps students *use* language to get things done. Linguists are saying this. So are psychologists, anthropologists, philosophers, and sociologists. Can educators be far behind? ■

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"Learning: Realities and Vision," ASCD's 36th Annual Conference and Exhibit Show, St. Louis, Missouri

Mar. 27-28, 1981:

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Nebraska ASCD, Columbus

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April 10-11, 1981:

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