

The Spoken Language and Literacy

Not only is speech the first language all human beings learn, it is the best medium by which each person finds his own niche in his society. Silence teaches little. The silence of the classroom is the deadliest of instructional atmospheres. The teacher who is convinced that noisy children are a direct threat to his authority deprives, and the word is used advisedly, children of interaction that is crucial to their development into literate humans.

The silent classroom denies the chance to learn. Enough has been written about the crushing totalitarianism of the teacher, benevolent or not, who permits talking only on his own terms. The best teachers know how to handle talking without losing control of their charges. No one wants a raging, disorganized, chaotic class, but the teacher who knows how to use speech for learning is a better teacher than the one who damps down the child's urges to communicate with his fellows. Classrooms need not be silent. Nor need they be uproarious. Speech, talk, communication are major resources of the teacher. There are many ways in which the teacher can use them.

Beginning Reading and Writing

A child begins his literacy by talking. He will simply not learn to read and write unless he can talk. Surprisingly he has mastered 90% of his adult ability to speak by the time he is four and a half. He is speaking in compound and complex sentences. He uses participles, infinitives, or anything else that is spoken in his home — including profanity. He is usually a very able talker by the time he reaches his first school year. He walks in that classroom door with a veritable storehouse of vocabulary, approximately 12,000 words. Unfortunately, our too commercialized educational activities show little awareness of the richness of this fact. Think of it! 12,000 words, without cost to the taxpayer, are available for use in any first grade. How does the teacher take advantage of this resource?

First of all, the teacher organizes talking. Of course, little instruction can occur if all children of a class of forty are talking aloud at the same time. Yet talking *must* occur if any reading and writing is to take place. Usually the teacher has children come and sit, on the floor, or on their chairs, together in a group. Then the teacher invites and helps children to share aloud with their peers some of the worthwhile happenings in their lives. This is sheer conversation. It is invaluable. It begins literate development.

As one child after another talks, the teacher eventually moves to write down some of what has been said. It is best to pick the most exciting, dramatic, or interesting topic. Interesting, that is, to most of the group. Once a body of writing has been recorded the teacher has a quantity of literature served up "bubbling hot" like toast, to quote Sylvia Ashton-Warner. These "stories" are often called "experience stories." But they can be just one word that captures a whole idea. For example, "BOO!" at Halloween is a one-word capsule of a total experience of dressing-up, being scared, scaring others, of playing witch or dragon, of making jack-o-lanterns, of lighting candles, and of having parties. Again for example, just the single word "Queen" stands for royalty in general, England, the Duke, parades, ceremonies, beautiful clothing, storybook fantasy, pictures on the wall in homes, the flag — literally a thousand images are conjured up by that one word. Teachers who know how to conduct these conversations have quantities of material to teach mechanics of reading and writing. Let me take you on to these mechanics.

The Place of Sight Vocabulary

The meaning of some words may be recognized instantaneously. Such words are usually called "sight vocabulary." One just looks at them and knows them right off. These words are most easily learned when they carry an emotional impact. (Unfortunately some teachers are determined to teach sight vocabulary without the slightest regard as to whether or not the words are familiar to the children who are to learn them.) Once such words are recorded (in various ways, but, in the beginning, on large cards or chalk board, with sizable letters), they can be used as a means of recognizing other words that begin with, or rhyme with, the same sounds (or phonemes). Sight words are first seen as a whole. The gestalt of the whole will eventually break down. The outsides of the words (i.e. their beginnings or their endings) are seen as parts of the word first. The middles of the words are seen — and heard — last.

Thus from these eight words, pupils are helped to see and hear those parts of the words that will be useful when they seek to unlock other words. The important thing is that these eight words are most helpful when they are part of the rich conversation of the learner. Obviously, drilling on unknown words is a waste of class time. But it is done! Let there be an end to it.

The Usefulness of the Alphabet

The alphabet has been much maligned as being of uncertain value to the English-speaking person. Quite the contrary is true. It is an extremely useful and helpful adjunct to any instructional program of learning to read and write.

The value of the alphabet lies in the fact that the majority of its letters sound enough like their name (i.e. the way they are referred to in the alphabet) to be recognizable by sound. For example, the first letter of "boy" is "B". What else could it begin with? Note that it is not "Bee-oy" or "Buh-oy" but "boy". Note also that it must be spoken, not looked at, but spoken. When the pupil hears the word "boy" and if he knows his alphabet, he would be dull indeed not to hear that the first letter in the word was a "B".

Take the first letters of the following words to illustrate the point further. "angel," "fat," "giant," "island," "kitchen," "moon," "nut," "ocean." Those words beginning with long vowels (i.e. "angel," "ocean," "island") are easily heard, as the vowel sounds are exactly the same in the word as they are spoken in the alphabet.

Supposing the word "sand" were to be learned. To spell the letter "S" phonically, it would appear "ess". Yet the word "sand" is not "ess-and." It is "sand." The sibilant in the letter name is readily audible.

Most of the letters of the alphabet sound enough like their names to be recognizable when heard in the natural setting of a word. To be sure there are other letters that sound not a whit like their names in the alphabet: for example, the first letters in "apple," "car," "elevator," "ghost," "ink," "house," "octopus," "world," "year." Yet in each case there is a distinctive sound to these beginning letters. They do not sound like any other letter. Thus they are easily learned. What other letter could the word "house" start with than an "H"? Could "year" start with other than a "Y"? Pupils need to be made aware, by hearing and speaking, that those letters with sounds all of their own are easily recognized.

Thus we can say that some letters in the alphabet have sounds all of their own and can be memorized as distinctive. No other letters need be confused with them.

Spelling and Writing

Spelling is for writing and nothing else. Too many teachers give children the idea that spelling is for the Friday test. They are raising havoc with the intrinsic principle of purposefulness of learning. When children are taught to recognize the various letter sounds in the alphabet as found in their own words, then they can learn how to write those other words beginning with the same sounds as in the words that are known. It may be that in the first instance the child can only record the first and the last letter. Fine. A line indicating missing letters will do for the moment, or until the teacher gets around to teaching the pupils the mechanics of hearing and seeing sounds in the middle of words.

It is the copying down that is important. When the child copies down one word one day, another word the next, and so on, soon he will want to put words with those words. Thus we have a sensible reason for learning words *without* powerful meaning. Words such as "was," "from," "about," "the," "and," "but," "for," and the like come into their own. They serve only to hold the language together. They have even been called "glue" words.

With these methods of increasing reading — and writing — vocabulary, the child can be off on a spree of writing at any time. He has enough skills to begin to write, and so, with a little help when needed, he can proceed to improve his literacy.

The point of all this is that spoken language starts it all off. Literacy, in truth, begins with speech.

Speech Helps Punctuation and Grammar

Once a child has written a series of sentences, stories, and other material, he can be helped to punctuate these products. Contrary to what some think, punctuation is best taught through speech. In fact, it cannot be taught silently. The thousands of pages of workbook exercises devoted to teaching commas, periods and quotation marks are a sheer waste. They are bad enough even if read aloud. They are worse if they are never read aloud.

The best way to teach punctuation, gender, tense, usage, in general, is to read one's own writing aloud. Then, as the writer

knows what he has tried to say, the voice inflection gives the place of the comma, the period, or the quotation marks. As the linguists have pointed out, the vocal inflection is what gives us meaning. Not the words as much as the voice. Words can be unintelligible and still convey much meaning. Not entirely, of course, but to a surprising extent. Oral language again leads the way to instruction. We learn punctuation and grammar from speaking, and from listening to speech.

Holding an Audience

School children learn to read more efficiently when the emphasis of their reading instruction is on silent reading. But this does not mean that some portion of the program cannot be devoted to reading aloud. Reading aloud is an art and is well worth the time spent on teaching it. Of course it is an oral language activity, and is dependent upon natural spoken language to give it meaning. The deadly dull droning of the child reading from a reader on the same page as a circle of listening peers is far too prevalent in our schools. Deadly dull droning anywhere has no reason for existence.

Reading aloud should have one main purpose — to hold the attention of an audience that does not have the same story and page in front of them. Readers must strive to spellbind an audience. Giving meaning that is learned in the first place from spoken language is the easiest, fastest and best way to accomplish this end.

Conclusion

While the subject of oral language in the classroom is by no means exhausted, the foregoing discussion touches upon some of its major and crucial areas. In most of these cases, oral language is used in a distinctly activist manner. Silence is too often the enemy of learning. Yet disorganization is not helpful either. The use of speech in learning to read, to write, to spell, to use the alphabet and to hold an audience's attention beckons to the wise teacher.