

*Toward a modern program of*

## Language Arts in the Elementary School

ANY program in the language arts should be geared to the needs of the learner. Yet how are the needs of the learner to be defined in the year 1961, and in the decade just ahead? The answer to this question depends upon the person who provides the definition. Over a period of time teachers have moved from a point where they have taught separate subjects such as spelling, handwriting, reading, literature, and oral and written expression, to a situation in which they teach children to listen, to speak, to read, to write in relation to the activities of the school day.

All children need to develop into well-rounded individuals who can contribute in many ways to the society of which they are a part. A child's ultimate development as an artist, teacher, writer, homemaker, politician, businessman, waitress, mechanic, musician or as a member of any other occupation, requires many skills. He must be able to feel, listen, read, think, understand, believe, express ideas, and in so doing to develop to the fullest extent of his ability in all aspects of living. It is such an approach as this that can result in a modern program in the language arts.

Some persons believe that children of elementary school age need to *learn more* sooner, faster and better in order to complete high school earlier and to become scientists and mathematicians required by the space age. To do this they recommend a tougher program slanted toward academic knowledge and skills. For example, probably because of the demand on the part of high school and college for emphasis on written expression, or "composition," many elementary schools are being pressured to return to the teaching of grammar, to regular assignment of topics for writing, to the setting of rigorous standards which every child must meet at each grade level.

One 1961 publication of a city school system emphasizes composition and grammar in grades four, five, and six, with stress almost exclusively on the parts of speech. These proposals are in conflict with the evidence presented by Robert Pooley.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Pooley states that the best foundation for spoken and written English in the elementary school, through grade six, is secured without formal instruction in grammar. Dr. Pooley says further that all evidence from research shows that formal grammar has very

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Pooley. *Teaching English Grammar*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957. p. 125-28.

slight influence on children's language usage, and has "little or no effect" upon skills in composition. Grammatical terminology may confuse a child rather than help him. It is a well-known fact that young children growing up in an environment in which they are exposed to correct usage, speak correctly without knowledge of rules of any sort.

### Virginia's Approach to Written Expression

A new bulletin<sup>2</sup> issued by the Virginia State Board of Education makes a sound approach to problems of written expression or composition, according to the viewpoint of many classroom teachers who contributed to its preparation. The publication is written to show "gradual development in a child's written composition, and its relationship to his total development," based on an assumption that children learn to write by writing.

Teachers are urged: (a) to discuss with children the ideas they wish to express and the best form for expressing these; (b) to provide children with opportunities for genuinely purposeful writing; (c) to create a learning environment in which children have meaningful experiences; (d) to assist the child in evaluating his own progress and determining how and where he needs to improve; and (e) to challenge the child to broaden his vocabulary gained through listening and reading, for use in writing.

This bulletin is an example of a soundly based guide which is specific without being limiting. A person who reads it will get a bird's-eye view of the scope of a child's writing experience as he progresses through the elementary

<sup>2</sup>Virginia State Board of Education. *Children's Written Composition*. Vol. XLIV, No. 4, September 1961. 28 p.

school. In cities and counties, as well as in States, there is a trend toward the charting of skills in the various aspects of the language arts. Some of the most helpful charts indicate the grade level at which a skill is introduced, where it receives the greatest emphasis, and show the extent to which, once it is introduced, it receives continuing attention throughout the elementary school years.

In language arts there is relatively little new subject matter content in comparison with the areas of science, mathematics, and social studies. However, the introduction of television has had an important impact on children.

### Developments in Certain Areas

In today's fast-moving world, children are learning many things outside of school that influence their ideas and their behavior. Wilbur Schramm,<sup>3</sup> writing of the impact of TV on children, reports that a typical child spends one-sixth of his waking hours with TV. By the age of three, one-third of the children are TV lookers and listeners; by the age of five, the figure is up to 80 percent. He states that at least 95 percent of children of school age see commercial TV in their own homes or in other places, and that 90 percent have the experience regularly. Other writers have indicated that TV is probably the one common experience which children bring with them when they come to school. It is likely that children not only acquire ideas from TV, but their habits of listening, speaking and reading are also affected by what they hear and see through this important medium of communication.

<sup>3</sup>Wilbur Schramm. "Television in the Life of the Child—Implications for the School." *New Teaching Aids for the American Classroom*. Stanford: The Institute for Communication Research, 1960. p. 50-70.

In some schools, middle grade children are encouraged to plan and carry out a self-survey of their own TV looking and listening habits and those of all children in the school, in order to evaluate types of programs selected and amount of viewing time per week. Children themselves make recommendations as a result of such studies. Such a project itself represents a purposeful use of many of the language arts skills.

*Listening* is a relatively new skill to be included in curriculum guides, although research dates back to 1928. Teachers realize that children must be helped specifically in developing listening skills, but have done less in this respect than with speaking, reading and writing. Ruth Strickland<sup>4</sup> lists nine levels of listening, ranging from little conscious listening to listening with real meeting of the minds. The listening skills need emphasis in every year of the child's school life.

In the area of *speaking*, new developments have come about, not in the content, but in the use of the tape recorder. Children read or speak to the recorder and listen to their performances as a basis for discovering needs for improvement. Recordings made at intervals throughout the school year can be used both with children and with their parents to show progress.

Individualized approaches to reading are in today's spotlight. The idea is not new, since it dates to the early 1920's. Teachers have described their varied ways of developing an individualized program in the magazines, *Elementary English*, *Childhood Education* and *Educational Leadership*.

In developing an individualized pro-

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Strickland. *Language Arts in the Elementary School*. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company. Rev. 1957. p. 464.

gram, the teacher's procedure depends upon a number of factors: (a) ability to organize, (b) ability to work with children, (c) size of the group, (d) previous experience of pupils, (e) knowledge about books of varying difficulty and different interest appeal, and (f) availability of such books. Opinions differ on whether trade books alone should be used, or whether reading textbooks also have a place. The teacher has conferences with each individual pupil at intervals to evaluate progress and to record accomplishment. Since reading is a highly personalized experience, the individual approach has much to commend it.

Because of increasing interest in development of skills, literature and recreational reading have often been neglected. In the past ten years, teachers have used these aspects of reading as a springboard to *creative writing*. Teachers who love poetry provide children with many experiences in hearing, reading, and rereading poems in many situations. With teacher guidance, children identify rhythm and patterns in verse, learn to associate words with feelings, sounds, touch, taste, smell, and may then produce verse rhymed or unrhymed, individually or as a group. Prose, too, can stimulate children to write. Teacher and children in the middle grades may read at sight a book such as *Charlotte's Web* through the first two chapters. Then each child writes a paragraph or more telling what he anticipates the story will be. Children may also write, illustrate and make covers for poems and stories, for their own use in their classroom.

Developments that lie primarily in the future are in the field of *linguistics*. Secondary schools are feeling the impact of this relatively new concept, but elementary schools scarcely at all. Stated

simply, linguistics is concerned with the science of language. As Paul Roberts states the case, the reason for linguistics is "to develop a feeling for the structure of language." Such a concept is expected to displace grammar eventually as a basis for understanding the relationship of words as they are used to express meaning.

Several years ago, Alice Miel<sup>5</sup> proposed an alternative to foreign language teaching in the elementary school. She suggested encouraging a program of comparative language study in which children would explore word origins—names of streets, cities, rivers, states, persons listed in the telephone directory. Such experiences would help middle-grade children to understand the complex problems of communication throughout the world. Children would note likenesses and differences between other languages and the English language; might listen to a recording of Chaucer's "Prologue," in order to develop an interest in the history of their own language.

Two of the most persistent questions concerning language arts in the elementary school program are these: Should each elementary school staff have a specialist in language arts? And, if each teacher does not come prepared as a specialist, what sort of in-service program can educate the new staff member, and often the teacher long in service, to improve skills in communication, and to help children do the same?

The use of a specialist to many persons means a return to a departmentalized organization of the elementary school, particularly in the middle grades. In the common interpretation

<sup>5</sup> Alice Miel, "Does Foreign Language Belong in the Elementary School?" *Teachers College Record* 56: 139-48, December 1954.

of departmentalization, the specialist stays in his classroom and the children travel from teacher to teacher.

An historical review<sup>6</sup> of departmentalization shows that it has been tried and dropped many times, usually with a new name attached each time it appears. Some of the disadvantages in this plan are lack of balance in the program of the child, and the development of subject matter learning in separate compartments. In any case, it is desirable that a consultant or supervisor with competency in language arts be available on call to help any teachers who need assistance.

One of the best ways to help teachers improve on the job is to organize and conduct cooperatively workshops that enable teachers to concentrate on their own problems. Language arts workshops vary from a day to two weeks in length. They may be held at any time during the school year, at night, or in the summer, to suit the convenience of teachers. It is desirable to have a planning committee consisting of teachers, principals and supervisors which considers possibilities and makes decisions. Talks, work groups organized by grade levels or interests, panels, buzz groups, individual projects all have a place in a good workshop program.

Continuing study of curriculum problems; studies which enlist teacher participation in surveys of practice in various aspects of the language arts; production of materials for classroom use; and publication of articles are only some of the other experiences in which teachers engage to improve their competencies.

<sup>6</sup> Elementary Schools Section, Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. "Elementary School Organization . . . What Direction Shall It Take?" *Education Briefs*, No. 37, January 1960.

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