
TWENTY QUESTIONS ABOUT TEACHING LANGUAGE

There is a scientific knowledge
base on which to build school programs
for developing literacy.

YETTA AND KENNETH GOODMAN

Reading grew as a field of special concern in education before a completely rational and scientific knowledge base was available. Practitioners, clinicians, and supervisors built a technology out of their own experiences and intuitions. Publishers and curriculum makers then took this technology and developed tests, basal readers, skill sequences, and all the other paraphernalia of reading instruction.

Over the years, tradition lent weight to this technology. Many of us working in the vineyards took for granted that what we were doing was sound because people had been doing it for such a long time. This view can be hard to shake loose even if we know we are not serving well some of the pupils we are trying to reach.

It would not have been easy for us as a profession to reexamine this technology objectively, keeping what is supported by scientific knowledge and abandoning the rest. But events of recent years have made that possibility even less likely.

A movement some call a cult of efficiency now worships technology,

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often confusing it with science. This movement is based on some of the premises of modern industrial management with catch phrases like "cost effectiveness," "accountability," "performance criteria."

Applied to reading education this movement has taken existing tests, based on inadequate and outmoded knowledge, and made them the determinants of the curriculum by imposing a test-teach-test model. It has combed out of basal reading programs the skill sequences and turned them into management systems, often making "mastery" of the skills the sole means to judge pupil achievement. Teachers face the absurd situation of having voracious readers labeled non-readers because they can't meet criterion level on skill mastery tests while ineffective readers are labeled excellent for acing the tests.

We do have a scientific base of knowledge, however, on which school programs for developing literacy can be built. Much of the scientific base contradicts common sense and is therefore not widely understood, even by professional educators. We're going to discuss 20 true-false statements in presenting this scientific base. We invite you to discuss them with your colleagues.

Statement 1: *Children learn language by imitating adults.*

Answer: False

Language learning is much more complex than simple imitation. Children are actively and creatively involved in their own language development. Each of you can probably think of a word or phrase that is part of your family language that was created by the baby in the family. Even as adults we call blankets "bottoms" or "binkies" with other family members because those names were created by the children in the family before the age of 18 months. Karen, at age two, sang to her doll, "I never love anything else, I only love E-G-G." And E-G-G was her doll's name for years.

Researchers believe that language is a creative process, but because it is necessary to communicate socially, language learning becomes a tug-of-war for the language learner: the child tries out new sounds and words but at the same time is concerned with understanding and being understood by others. Adult communication, response, and tracking of the child's meaning are therefore important, but the child is in control—making decisions about what works and what must be discarded.

Jonathon, age four, reflected on this communication issue while eating a piece of pie. "Mom, this is the goodest pie you ever made." Mother responded, "Jonathon, there is no such word as 'goodest.'" After a long pause, Jonathon said, "How come I can say it then?"

Statement 2: Oral and written language are learned differently.

Answer: False

Research shows that written language is learned in a similar fashion to oral language. Because educators considered written language a school-related task, they categorized children who entered school knowing how to read and write as precocious, rather than look for the universality of written language learning.

Dolores Durkin, in the 1960s, found children from wide socioeconomic backgrounds entering school knowing how to read. Gertrude Hildreth and a German psychologist, Legrun, in the 1930s, did research on writing development in young children before school entrance. Edmund Huey made reference to children who read prior to school in the early 1900s.

Now research from Mexico, the United States, Australia, Uruguay, Canada, Switzerland, and New Zealand suggests that children who grow up in a literate environment learn a great deal about the nature of print before they come to school. They develop the knowledge of directionality, of the purpose print serves in different settings. Think of how quickly a young child's taste buds are activated when he or she sees a McDonald's or a Coca-Cola sign.

Statement 3: People learn language from the smallest unit to the largest. For example, they learn letter-sound relationships first, then sentences, then paragraphs, and then pages.

Answer: False

The part-whole, whole-part controversy is still with us in American education. Yet our own research in reading and writing suggests that in order to understand the parts of any aspect of learning, there must be an awareness and understanding of the function and purpose of the whole.

Have you ever walked into the middle of a conversation about a movie you haven't seen, for instance, and finally had to ask, "What in the world are you talking about?" So it is with all language learning, especially for children. Once they know what language is and how it is used, they can understand and learn specifics. Never, however, can the parts be meaningful by themselves.

Early in our miscue research, we concluded that a story is easier to read than a page, a page easier than a paragraph, a paragraph easier than a sentence, a sentence easier than a word, and a word easier than a letter.

Our research continues to support this conclusion and we believe it to be true. It raises questions, though, about the instructional practices we see in schools today. Teaching sounding-out, structural analysis, and word recognition confuses students about the function and purpose of reading.

We have met too many students who have never read more than work sheets or short story instructional exercises at one sitting. We have met too many students who believe authors write stories to teach them new words.

Statement 4: English is a harder language to learn to speak and understand than other languages.

Answer: False

This popular belief comes from non-English speakers who complain about the inconsistencies of the rules of English. We seem to be more conscious of the inconsistencies of a new language we learn as adults.

However, for any infant, whatever language is spoken in the home is as easy to learn as any other. Even if several languages are spoken, by the time children are three or four they can talk to adults in the home showing that they know which language to use. Language is learned because of anticipation, social need, and understanding the social context.

Tamara, a four-year-old we met on a plane from Israel to England, is a good example of this. As she entered the plane she spoke Yiddish to her mother and Hebrew to her little brother. When she realized one of us could speak Yiddish and English, she pointed to things and asked over and over "Vi zoi zagt mein ainglish" ("How do you say in English"). By the time the steward came down the aisle to her she was able to say, "I don't want tea, want milk."

Statement 5: Japanese is an easier language to learn to read than English.

Answer: False

People think some languages are easier to learn to read than others because of form. Spanish and Finnish are often cited as easy because of a "one-to-one" relationship between letter and sound. Japanese is thought to be easy because of the high literacy rate in Japanese society. Certainly form cannot be the reason for Japanese to be easy to learn to read; Japanese literates must learn an alphabetic, a syllabic, and a Chinese character system, and know when to use right to left, left to right, or top to bottom processing.

Languages are not easier or harder to learn because of form. They are easy or hard for psychosocial reasons from the point of view of the learner in familial and cultural contexts:

1. Do I really want to learn to read this language?
2. What payoff does learning to read this language have for me?
3. How will other people in my social group perceive me if I learn to read this language?
4. Do I have real, relevant reasons to learn to read this language?



“Think of how quickly a young child’s taste buds are activated when he or she sees a McDonald’s or a Coca-Cola sign.”

5. Do I have functions for which I can use this ability to read?

Statement 6: *Children who are bilingual are handicapped in learning to read and write English.*

Answer: *False*

This notion developed for two reasons: (1) too many Americans involved in decision making, testing, and research in education are monolingual and that in itself has become a standard; and (2) traditionally, our working class has had the largest percentage of bilinguals and since working-class students score more poorly on standardized tests, we jump to cause-effect conclusions.

If we broaden our view, we find that literate people from non-English-speaking countries are often bilingual and for many the second language they learn to read at an early age is English.

Statement 7: *Children who speak low-status dialects will find their dialects interfere with learning to read and write.*

Answer: *False*

Because the lowest test scores occur in areas where people speak low-status dialects, we generalize about people who speak those dialects. Yet we know that within every group the majority learns to read and write easily and well. Our own research on eight different populations including Rural Black, Appalachian, Down East Maine, and Hawaiian Pidgin demonstrated these dialects did not contribute to any difficulty in learning to read. In fact, we concluded that the only disadvantage was rejection of these dialects by the school and the pervasive attitude that speakers of low-status dialects have difficulty learning to read.

Statement 8: *You have to learn to speak a language before you can learn to read it.*

Answer: *False*

Because language is social, most initial encounters with new languages are oral; for the human infant language encounters are almost universally oral. However, whenever there are social reasons for initial encounters not to be oral, the pressing need for language causes other forms to occur. Hearing-impaired people develop sign language, and people who need to communicate over time and space develop written language. It is possible to speak one language and read another. Literate Arabs read classical Arabic and speak a modern dialect of Arabic. Many educated Japanese, Greeks, Israelis, and others are literate in English but have little control over oral English.

We learn the forms of oral or written language (dialects, styles, and registers) that are most functional for our personal and social uses. This is the important issue when considering which languages to use for instructional purposes.

Statement 9: *When people show evidence of a first language in oral or written use of a second language, there is interference with learning and communication.*

Answer: *False*

When languages come in contact with each other, they influence each other. Certainly, at times such influences can result in a lack of communication or understanding. In such cases the learner needs help but usually lack of communication is due to basic conceptual misunderstanding, not simply different pronunciations.

However, if a new speaker of English says “I’m washing the kishen dishes” or “Ve vant you haf very nice happiness” or “Dat’s da man ova-deh,” in appropriate context with people who are intent on communication, then there is no interference at all. We must know how to set our priorities in helping people learn to read and write. Focus must be on meaning—that’s where we must place our efforts in instruction. If we fuss about the language influences which do not disrupt meaning, we can actually interfere with the development of the reading and writing processes.

Statement 10: *You've got to be smart to be able to learn to read and write.*

Answer: *False*

There is no evidence of a relationship between intelligence and learning to read and write. There is evidence from research that children with low IQ scores do learn to read and write and that children with high IQ scores may have difficulty learning written language. What is important is function and purpose. When learners understand that they actively and personally control their own learning, then they do learn to read and write. If, somehow, learners believe that they are incapable of learning, this belief can interfere with their literacy.

Statement 11: *Only children with visual and auditory acuity and highly developed motor skills will learn to read and write without difficulty.*

Answer: *False*

All children who recognize their mothers from other women, their fathers from other men, dogs from cats, bananas from pineapples, have visual acuity. All children who can carry on a conversation, who can sing a familiar song, have auditory acuity. We can develop tests to show that anybody is defective. Yet there is no demonstrable relationship between physiological ability and written language development.

The issue really is how much ability to distinguish letters and sounds in language context is necessary for reading and writing. Research shows that the vast majority of children have enough; a little bit goes a long way. Blind people write, palsied people read, deaf people can read and write.

Language development comes from being immersed in language use. "Readiness" activities designed to develop visual and auditory discrimination, which have nothing to do with language, are worse than useless: They divert both the teacher and the learner from the real language strengths pupils have.

Statement 12: *We learn to read by matching letters to sounds and then learning to comprehend the sound patterns we decode.*

Answer: *False*

All learners must first be aware that reading is building meanings. As we learn to use written language to construct meaning, we become aware that reading has component

parts. We then become more consciously aware that there are relationships between letters and sounds, that written language is made up of words and sentences and paragraphs. But first we must be aware that the function of written language is to communicate—something which occurs only in written language. Young children show us this awareness. They know print communicates when they point to written language and ask "What does this say?" They show us that they know how written language works when they open a book and read "Once upon a time."

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We can teach children letter names and the sounds letters represent and we can teach them words in isolation from the context of language, but we now know that these methods do not lead children to reading. Too many children in the last ten years have had highly structured, sequenced programs that allow them to do well in early grades on standardized tests that measure highly structured, sequenced tasks but do not teach them to read. The functional awareness of the isolated skills of reading is a result of learning to read, not a prerequisite.

Statement 13: *A natural hierarchy of reading skills has been established through research.*

Answer: *False*

No research has produced any information to suggest a reader must know this letter, this sound, this word, or this syllabic rule before some other. This is evident in basal reader programs; each presents a different hierarchy and a different sequence. Our research suggests that

all language cues must be integrated with the reading strategies from the very beginning of learning to read for reading to occur. The reader must be using the relationship between letter patterns and sound patterns to predict and confirm the written language. At the same time the reader must monitor the syntax of the language and say (if he or she is reading English), "Does this sound like English to me?"

But, most important, as the reader proceeds he or she must know that the target is meaning. If it doesn't make sense, the reader has to apply the strategies in different ways to solve the problem of not understanding. Most readers are usually not conscious of this activity. Like the rules language-users employ as they speak and listen, reading strategies are intuitive and readers are seldom able to discuss their existence. Reading is a process through which the reader makes sense out of written language. Analyzing the rules of language, its sounds, and its form is the work of a linguistic scholar not of the language-using beginning reader.

Statement 14: *It's important to insist on accuracy at all stages in reading and writing.*

Answer: *False*

Accuracy and perfection stand in the way of reading and writing instruction. In no other field do we require perfection from day one on the learning job. No novice bicycle rider, swimmer, dancer, or artist is asked to perform even on simple tasks with the perfection we expect of the beginning reader or writer. Letters must be formed "just so"; sounds must be uttered to match the teacher's perfectly; words must be what the teacher expects to hear no matter how closely the reader approaches the author's meaning; sentences must be written using someone's notion of accurate syntax. Yet, it is through a positive view of error that researchers have begun to discover that language learners are creative and actively involved in their own language learning. It is through the errors or miscues children make in reading that we've learned that reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game.

The child who says "I runned all the way home after school yesterday," is letting us know that she is aware of the past tense rule in Eng-

lish. The child who spells walked as "walkt" and kissed as "kist" is showing awareness of the relationship between letters and sounds. The Hawaiian child who reads "He was one big fat duck" for "He was a big fat duck" is letting us in on the ability to read one kind of dialect and translate into dialect in order to comprehend. Through errors we see the learner hypothesizing like a scientist, providing evidence of intelligent processing, not simply lack of accuracy.

Statement 15: *An average fourth grader should be able to read anything with fourth-grade readability.*

Answer: *False*

Everyone is illiterate to some degree. No matter how good a reader you are each of you is aware of your own limitations. Some find it difficult to read statistics, others linguistics or chemistry, while still others find it difficult to read sports or horoscopes or directions to put toys together, knit, or crochet. It is not simply the number of words in a sentence or the high or low frequencies of the particular words or the complexity of the syntax that cause difficulty for the reader. Readability rests in the knowledge and background of the reader.

What we know and understand we can read easily. What is unfamiliar and filled with new concepts and ideas is difficult to read. That's why the statement "Every teacher is a reading teacher" is so important. Only a science teacher can help children know what's different about the reading of science and know what conceptualizations a reader must have in order to read science material effectively. This is true of every subject matter area.

Readability formulas can actually confuse the issue of what makes reading easy or hard. People begin to believe that if you shorten the sentences and use high frequency words you will help the reader understand. This is misguided. Such manipulations can actually make materials more difficult to read and provide readers with misconceptions and oversimplifications. Such manipulations often eliminate important and necessary relational terms such as "however," "nevertheless," "in spite of."

Statement 16: *We construct meaning as we read.*

Answer: *True*

You probably thought we would never get to any true statements. Reading, like all language processes, is creative. Readers bring their background knowledge and experience to their reading. They actively search for meaning while engaged in the long distance conversation between themselves and the author.

Think of oral conversations. How often do you finish a sentence for a friend or know what a family member is going to say? Reading involves similar strategies. We are always leaping to meaning and jumping to conclusions. That is why reading can never be the accurate reproduction of what's on the written page as too many reading instructional programs try to make it. That's why we say, "Yes, we construct meaning as we read."

Statement 17: *Children given encouragement will begin to write on their own.*

Answer: *True*

Only recently have we begun to study the impact reading and writing have on each other. Researchers find that given the opportunity children discover the written language system on their own. We've ignored the evidence that has always been there because of the notion that only teachers can teach kids to write. Think about the young children you know who scribble, pretend to write letters, who come to a parent with a string of letters they've written and say, "Read this to me." Each is evidence of writing in its early beginnings. It's akin to babbling, which we now understand is significant to oral language development.

In a supportive, encouraging environment, children begin to label their things: "Keep out," "Warning," "Betty's Place." Their own names are important to them. Even as early as three, Anders looked at a supermarket bag that said "Safeway," pointed to the "A" and said, "That's mine, that's Anders." With a crayon, he then wrote "A's" all over the bag.

Statement 18: *With no direct spelling instruction, children will invent spellings that show rules for representing the sound patterns of their mother tongue as they write.*

Answer: *True*

We have ample evidence for this from children as young as four. The invented spellings children use repre-

sent the intuitive rules they are developing about sounds and graphic patterns of the written language system. In her first-grade story, Jennifer wrote 11 past tense regular verbs. Each ended with a "t" or "d" to represent the oral equivalent. Walked, kissed, wrapped were all spelled with a "t" at the end; said and yelled were spelled with a "d" at the end. In the second grade, Jennifer moved toward the conventional spellings and all but three of her past tense regular verbs had the appropriate endings. Within one year, Jennifer developed from using the relationship between sound and letter, to an awareness of the spelling patterns in relation to past tense morphemes, with no direct teaching of spelling.

Statement 19: *With no direct spelling instruction, children will move continuously toward conventional spelling.*

Answer: *True*

If children are provided with a supportive environment where writing is considered communicative, where audiences are available to share ideas, where the content of the message is what's important, then they develop a reason to become more and more conventional in their spelling. But children who are encouraged to write without concern for accuracy in form often use complicated words and phrases; they continue to invent spellings, always coming closer to conventional spellings but seldom with 100 percent accuracy.

In writing curriculum as in reading, we have placed the cart before the horse and demanded accuracy of form prior to focusing on the significance of communication as the major purpose for written language. Until we turn this notion around and help learners find reasons and purpose for written communication prior to an overconcern for accuracy of form whether it be handwriting, spelling, or grammar, we will not have many confident and proficient writers in our society.

Statement 20: *Researchers clearly don't agree on the answers to the important questions—how reading and writing work, how they are learned, or how they should be taught. Shouldn't teachers keep doing what they're already doing until all the researchers and experts agree?*

Answer: False

Emphatically the answer is no. If you thought that the underlying theme of our 20 questions was a tribute to science, research, and new wisdom about language and reading, you're wrong. We believe that none of this knowledge is of any use if teachers don't use it to help learners. And that cannot happen unless teachers take charge in their own classrooms.

Teachers all over the United States are administering someone else's management system. They're talked of as part of the "delivery system," in which bite-sized bits of learning are delivered to learners who are themselves treated as passive, inert objects to which instruction in reading and writing is applied. Teachers are overwhelmed with packaged technology written into law in some districts or court-ordered in others.

In the name of mastery learning or minimal competency or accountability, teachers are prevented from acting as professionals. Classrooms are sterilized and dehumanized and children are locked onto an assembly line ironically labeled individualized instruction.

Teachers are ultimately the only ones who can make a difference. But they must individually and collectively assert their rights and responsibilities as professionals to be in charge of their own classrooms. They must take back from the test makers the responsibility for monitoring pupil progress. What can a 30-minute test show that a professional teacher can't know in five or six hours a day for 180 days or more a year? They must take back from the basal reader publisher responsibility for the curriculum. How can anybody in Boston, or New York, or Chicago know what every child in America needs next? How can they know what Juan or Leroy or Keoki would respond to today? Responsible professional teachers can turn the tests and texts into resources to be used at their discretion at the right time, with the right pupils.

We're realists. We know that what we ask takes courage and hard work. We know that teachers will need to keep themselves knowledgeable and that they will need the support of administrators, supervisors, teacher educators, researchers, and parents.

But we also believe that learners

are basically in control of their own cognitive processes. Learners develop belief in their own abilities and choose what to learn, adjusting their strategies to meet the situation in which they will learn. If the context provides choice, allows flexibility, encourages integration, then learning produces growth and development.

Most crucial is the new role of an enlightened teacher who serves as a guide, facilitator, and kid-watcher. Such a teacher can capitalize on the language competence and language learning ability of children and help them make literacy an extension of their natural language development. ■

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