The Rediscovery of Language in Education

ROGER W. SHUY

One of the most exciting developments in education is the 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 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."

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.

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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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ASCD Upcoming Events

Mar. 7-10, 1981:

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

Mar. 27-28, 1981:

NCSI, "Leadership Styles," Washington, D.C.

April 6-7, 1981:

NCSI, "Teacher Evaluation," Chicago

Nebraska ASCD, Columbus

April 9-10, 1981:

NCSI, "Teacher Evaluation," Chicago

April 10-11, 1981:

NCSI, "Public Confidence," Nashville

April 30-May 1, 1981:

Ohio ASCD, Columbus

May 1-2, 1981:

NCSI, "Discipline," San Francisco

May 3-5, 1981:

New York ASCD, Kamesha Lake

May 11-12, 1981:

NCSI, "Gifted/Talented," Reno

May 14-15, 1981:

NCSI, "Effective Instruction," Atlantic City

May 14-16, 1981:

Affiliated Unit Presidents' Conference, Omaha

FORM

FUNCTION

Language Teaching

Language Learning

Reading

decoding

speaking

writing

decoding

vocabulary

mechanics

word parts

words

syntax

comprehension

discourse-meaning

discourse-cohesion

writing mechanics

grammar

vocabulary

words

syntax

comprehension

Grammar