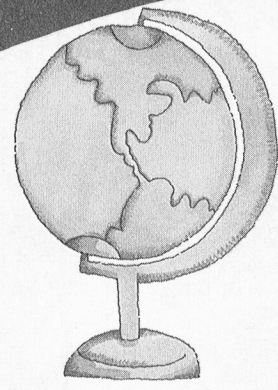


Issues and Trends in Literacy



Exploring the connection between oral language and early reading

Linda B. Gambrell

In the United States, one component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2001 is the Reading First program, which focuses on improving the literacy development of children in grades K–3. States applying for federal NCLB funds must demonstrate that they will use research-based, scientifically proven reading programs to improve literacy. Although NCLB provisions include many sound recommendations, some aspects of oral language development appear to be emphasized, such as phonemic awareness, while others are either excluded or given minor emphasis (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2002). As a result, researchers are currently exploring more fully the role of other aspects of oral language in early literacy development, as well as continuing to investigate the role of phonemic awareness.

What we know and what we need to know

We know a great deal about the oral language competence of young children. For example, we know that children come to school with a great deal of knowledge about language. They have command of their native language, can use complex sentences, and have a vocabulary of approximately 5,000 words. What remains elusive is the precise connection between oral language and reading achievement. While much existing research on this topic focuses on one or two aspects of language, such as phonemic awareness, emerging research considers the multidimensional nature of our

linguistic system. It is clear that we need to know more about the relationship between oral language and reading development because of the important implications for early identification and effective instruction for children who are struggling literacy learners.

An exploratory study

Oral language and reading are developmental in nature and undergo both qualitative and quantitative changes across time. Research suggests that phonological awareness plays a crucial role in word decoding; however, other higher order oral language skills may become more influential as reading acquisition proceeds. This hypothesis was explored in a study by Roth, Speece, and Cooper (2002). They reported findings from the first three years of a longitudinal study designed to clarify the relationship between oral language (receptive and expressive) and early reading acquisition. The study was designed to identify the specific contributions of different language skills and background factors to early reading acquisition. The researchers used a broad oral language framework that included background (race, gender, socioeconomic status, family literacy, IQ); structural language (semantics, morphology, syntax); metalinguistics (phonological awareness, metasemantics); and narrative discourse (familiar story production, story comprehension). In this framework, language is viewed as a complex system of skills that interact and overlap with one another, but it assumes that different literacy tasks measure different aspects of language.

In their study, Roth et al. (2002) followed a group of normally developing kindergarten children for three years (from kindergarten to grade 2), obtaining measures of structural language, metalinguistics, narrative discourse, and background variables in kindergarten. They collected reading measures in kindergarten and in first and second grades. The reading measures for kindergarten included Reid, Hresko, and Hammill's (1991) Test of Early Reading Ability-2 (print awareness) and the Letter-Word Identification (identification of single letters and words) and Word Attack subtests (the pronunciation of pseudowords) of the 1989 Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-Revised. In first and second grades, the reading measures included the Letter-Word Identification and Word Attack subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson test, as well as the Passage Comprehension subtest. The analysis the researchers used provided a stringent test of the relative influence of different variables (parsimonious regression modeling). First, they identified variables related to structural language, narrative discourse, metalinguistics, and background factors that were significant predictors of early reading. Then, they determined which variables were most important to early reading.

What phonological awareness did not predict

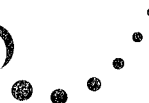
The findings of this study revealed (as expected) that phonological awareness measured in kindergarten predicted word and pseudoword reading in first and second grades. What was most interesting, however, was what phonological awareness did not predict—reading comprehension in first and second grades. The results of the study indicate that semantic abilities (i.e., the ability to derive meaning from printed words) and print awareness were the most predictive of first- and second-grade reading comprehension. The two semantic skills that were important for reading comprehension were oral definitions and word retrieval. The findings of this study are in line with previous research by Snow and her colleagues (Dickinson & Snow, 1987; Snow, 1991; Snow, Cancino, Gonzalez, & Shriberg, 1989), indicating that decontextualized language skills, such as the

ability to define words, are strongly correlated with children's reading and spelling achievement. In a more recent study, Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, and Kurland (1995) found that oral definitions measured in kindergarten and first grade were the strongest oral language predictors of word decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling. The research of Snow and her colleagues and the findings from the Roth et al. (2002) study support the contention that vocabulary (as measured by oral definitions) is important to the development of reading comprehension ability as skilled reading begins to emerge.

Roth et al. (2002) also found that word retrieval (children in their study were required to name individually presented pictures of familiar objects) was also associated with comprehension ability. As the authors noted, word retrieval involves a phonological processing component; therefore, it is most accurate to conclude that word retrieval influence on reading comprehension represents a confluence of semantic and phonological knowledge.

With respect to metalinguistic ability, the findings of Roth et al. (2002) are consistent with the findings of other studies: Phonological awareness measured in kindergarten predicted first- and second-grade word identification and pseudoword reading. Phonological awareness was a better predictor of second-grade, word-level reading than was word decoding or pseudoword reading measured in kindergarten. The study data also supported the hypothesis that metalinguistic skills, as measured by comprehension and production of lexically ambiguous sentences, contributed to first-grade word reading equal to that contributed by phonological awareness. The inference, then, is that the ability to manipulate the meaning component of language is one of the significant indicators of single-word reading.

Narrative discourse, as measured by the ability to retell a familiar story and the Del Rio English Story Comprehension Test (Toronto, Leverman, Hanna, Rosenzweig, & Maldonado (1975), assessed in kindergarten was not found to be associated with reading comprehension performance in first and second grade. Roth et al. (2002) hypothesized that narrative discourse would increasingly account for reading comprehension performance as children mastered single-word reading and began



to read connected text for meaning. One possible explanation for this finding is that reading at the end of second grade may still be primarily a decoding task, and narrative skill may become more important as children become more proficient readers.

Final thoughts

The old adage “Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” may be appropriate, given the findings of this study. While phonological awareness may be a significant factor in early reading development, Roth et al.’s (2002) study provides evidence that other variables, such as vocabulary knowledge and print awareness, are also important predictors of beginning reading for both word-level skills and text comprehension. We should not lose sight of the fact that other aspects of oral language may be equally important. Early literacy instruction should emphasize vocabulary development and print awareness, along with phonemic awareness.

According to Roth et al. (2002), their findings “both mirror and challenge previous work and assumptions” (p. 247). They speculated that semantic and metasemantic variables, in addition to phonological awareness, are the best candidates to elaborate the oral language and early reading connection. They also noted the absence of data to support the presumed influence of narrative discourse on reading comprehension and the need to further explore the role of narrative discourse in reading development. Perhaps the next report from Roth et al., as they continue their longitudinal study, will provide further insights about the connections between oral

language and the role of narrative discourse as children move on from being emerging readers to become proficient ones.

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