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WHOLE LANGUAGE OR PHONICS: IMPROVING LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION THROUGH GENERAL SEMANTICS

MELANIE C. BROOKS AND JEFFREY S. BROOKS*

TWO STRATEGIES have dominated reading instruction in the United States: whole language and phonics.

Whole Language Instruction

Whole language instruction operates from the premise “that youngsters acquire language rather than learn it through direct teaching; that language learning is child-centered, not teacher-dominated; that language is integrated rather than fragmented; that children learn by talking and doing rather than through passive listening.” (Heald-Taylor, 1989, p.16)

* Melanie C. Brooks recently completed her Master of Library Science degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia and Jeffrey S. Brooks teaches at The Florida State University. They live together in Tallahassee, Florida. Jeffrey S. Brooks’ article “General Semantics and Emergent Language Acquisition Instruction” appeared in the Winter 2001-2002 ETC.
In the whole language approach, classroom activities focus on students, who are asked to interact with text in various ways: questioning, problem-solving, listening, writing, drawing, dramatizing, reading, and orally responding, among numerous other skill-building strategies. (Church, 1996, pp.3-4) Educators using the whole language strategy carefully “organize time and space” to allow students to independently and collectively engage in texts, at their own speed and often in their own ways. (Church, 1996, p.3)

Yet, many educators, policymakers, and parents question the effectiveness of whole language instruction for the acquisition of the more technical aspects of language: spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. (Heald-Taylor, 1989, pp.38-50) Instructors using the whole language approach to instruction do not teach spelling, vocabulary, and grammar as isolated events; rather, whole language instruction teaches these functions of language contextually. Providing an example of a beginning speller working on writing a sentence, Heald-Taylor (1989) observed: “I wt s L nt (I went swimming last night) took … more than twenty minutes to write because [the student] labored over each sound (went … wu, wu, wu, w; t; swimming … s s s; last …, L,L,L; night … n, n, n, nt).” (p.38) Eventually, after working through each phoneme, this young student was able to express a meaningful statement. Whole language instructors value phonemic awareness, yet they support this awareness by encouraging students to engage texts through reading or writing rather than through isolated exercises; vocabulary and grammar are likewise taught through the reading and rereading of texts. (Church, 1996, p.82) Frequent exposure to words and the structure of language is paramount to whole language instruction. The “writing-drafting-revising process” is seen as much more important than the finished product. (Heald-Taylor, 1989, p.50) By incorporating phonics, vocabulary, and grammar skills into holistic learning events, “whole” language instructors act to facilitate success in students’ growth and overall achievement in reading.

The use of whole language teaching has decreased in recent years.

**Phonics Instruction**

The second and increasingly popular strategy for reading instruction is phonics. Phonics instruction provides students with the “understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes and graphemes, the letters that represent those sounds in written language.” (Armbruster, 2001, p.3) This method operates from the premise that children best learn language in a sequential and ordered process of acquiring linguistic components and then (re)arranging them appropriately. Instruction begins with students gaining phonemic awareness, or the ability to understand that the “sounds of spoken language work together to
Students show phonemic awareness by their ability to identify letters and their corresponding sounds, for example, the word *hat* can be identified by combining the individual sounds /h/ /a/ /t/. After demonstrating phonemic awareness, students begin to develop their phonological awareness, or their ability to rhyme, identify onset sounds, and recognize syllables. (Armbruster, 2001, p.3) This type of systematic phonic instruction directly teaches “letter-sound relationships in a clearly defined sequence ... including] the major sound/spelling relationships of both consonants and vowels.” (Armbruster, 2001, p.13) Phonics is a bottom-up approach to reading instruction. Teachers have a “plan of instruction [that] includes a carefully selected set of letter-sound relationships that are organized into a logical sequence.” (Armbruster, 2001, p.19)

Yet, educators are confused by what exactly encompasses phonics. Some educators see phonic instruction as a part of a larger reading program, while others see it as a systematic, comprehensive, and leveled approach for reading instruction in itself. (Armbruster, 2001, p.3) Heilman (1985) asserts that “Phonics is not a method of teaching reading, but is an essential ingredient of reading instruction.” (p.17) On the other hand, researchers claim that “children who received code-emphasis instruction (emphasis on phonics and decoding) achieved better in the first three grades than children who received meaning-emphasis instruction (emphasis on word identification through context).” (Eldredge, 2004, p.10) Further, Armbruster (2001) writes that veteran teachers have been systematically using phonic instruction to teach reading for years, which “confirms the importance and effectiveness of systematic phonics instruction, particularly in kindergarten and first-and second-grade classrooms.” (p.16) This confusion as to the role of phonic instruction and its corresponding effectiveness of reading development and comprehension attainment is unresolved.

**Doubts about Both Methods**

Educators remain divided as to the effectiveness of both whole language and phonic instruction for the teaching of reading comprehension. Neither technique has proven truly effective and fail-safe. Students still leave school unable to adequately understand or critically think about texts. Ladson-Billings (1998) writes that “the dropout rate for African American students in large urban centers is close to 50 percent ... A significant number of those who do graduate do not have the requisite knowledge and skills for post-secondary or meaningful work. (p.301) Anything that can have a positive effect on these results deserves consideration.
Improving Reading Instruction through General Semantics

This paper argues that teachers can enhance their reading instruction through the use of general semantics, regardless of which method they favor. By incorporating the principles of general semantics into their reading curriculum, teachers can connect the disparities between whole language and phonics while developing students’ critical thinking and metacognitive abilities.

In his 1933 work, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to non-Aristotelian Systems*, Alfred Korzybski introduced general semantics to the world. Korzybski believed that Aristotelian either-or (“all or none”) logic often distorts our language and our thinking because it excludes the subtle degrees of difference that make up much of our experience.

Further, Aristotle’s categorical syllogism (Angeles, 1992), which makes groupings of thing-events based on a single quality, creates inaccuracies because it does not take into account many possibilities:

Major Premise: All students in our school learn.
Minor Premise: Adam is a student in our school.
Conclusion: Therefore, Adam learns.

Such a conclusion ignores important possibilities, such as:

1. We may define “all,” “learning,” “school,” “is,” “our” and/or “student” differently than other students, instructors, or administrators do.

2. The student Adam may take outreach or Internet classes because he works 40 hours a week (in addition to school) to support his family. Is he still “in our school?”

3. Adam may have a different ethnicity, gender, etc., than the rest of his classmates and/or school personnel. Are his learning needs and styles different than those of the majority? If he does not conform to the dominant paradigm, is he not “learning?” Is he then a “failure?”

4. Is a student one who is enrolled in school, or possibly one who is also involved in extra-curricular activities? What part does school culture play in what a person “is”?

It is difficult to comprehend the extent to which such Aristotelian thinking influences our perception of reality. It runs rampant in advertising, academics, research, journalism, ethnography, etc., and it has a profound impact on our
linguistic construction, as language structure influences thinking, and thinking influences language structure.

**Intensional or Extensional Response**

One goal of general semantics is to help us respond more *extensionally*, to become more aware of our individual language-based biases and how they can influence our thinking and our action. Using general semantics we can respond more *extensionally* (in a more fact-oriented way) to what we read. In other words, we can become more aware of our individual language-based biases and how they can influence our thinking and our action. A failure to respond *extensionally* — putting words before facts — we call an *intensional* response.

Understanding the communicative element of texts helps students learn to read and write. To participate in the communicative element of texts, we must differentiate between extensional and intensional responses, and use these insights to understand what we can about how others think.

The general semantics formulations below can help us when attempting to resolve some problems relating to whole language and phonics teaching methods:

1. **There is no necessary connection between the symbol and that which is symbolized.** Symbols (language, objects to which we assign meaning, etc.) are independent of what is symbolized. “The word is not the thing.” A person can wear a Florida Marlins hat and not support the Florida Marlins. It is incorrect to assume that a person wearing a Florida Marlins hat must be a Florida Marlins fan. Symbols are not inherently connected to the thing symbolized. (Hayakawa, 1990, pp.16-17)

2. **No word ever has exactly the same meaning twice.** The context of an utterance determines its meaning. Since no two contexts are exactly the same, no two meanings can be exactly the same. We determine approximations of meanings through the context in which the utterance takes place. Thus, it is risky to separate the utterance from the circumstances in which it is encountered. (Hayakawa, 1990, pp.39-41)

3. **The language of everyday life sometimes obscures a multi-valued orientation.** If we assume that people interpret the world in different ways, and that those interpretations change over time, then it is difficult to conceive of many things as 100 percent good or 100 percent
bad. However, users of language often reduce things to the absurd extreme of “all or none.” It behooves speakers to identify and use a more precise incremental language (very good, somewhat unpleas-
ant, etc.) to react appropriately to the situation. (Hayakawa, 1990, p.142)

By incorporating the above principles into the study of reading, teachers can foster interpretations and evaluations that emphasize reflection and careful consideration, and therefore an understanding of the communicative element, the writer’s or speaker’s intent.

The Delayed Reaction

Korzybski suggests that a delayed and thoughtful reaction to language is preferable to an immediate, affective reaction. The importance of thoughtful reactions has potential significance for dispelling stereotypes and eliciting more accurate communication.

The knowledge that no two contexts are exactly the same and no two meanings can be exactly the same will be invaluable in negotiating the often difficult area of critical thinking and reading comprehension.

Using general semantics formulations, teachers can “un-teach” racial, gender, and other stereotypes — since group-member, is not group-member, — while reinforcing that the thing symbolized is not necessarily the thing itself. The knowledge that no two contexts are exactly the same and no two meanings can be exactly the same will be invaluable in negotiating the often difficult area of critical thinking and reading comprehension.

As students develop a multi-valued orientation, they can apply their new metacognitive skills to their reading, oral, and written work. However, it is important that they understand that either-or (“all or none”) categorizations are occasionally appropriate and useful. Generalizations and higher-order abstractions remain essential and extremely meaningful; general semantics reminds us of the potentially problematic ways in which we develop and use those generalizations.
Building a Bridge between Phonics and Whole Language: General Semantics in the Classroom

For general semantics to be practical, it must be adopted at Klein’s (1991) operational level, or at the point in the “curriculum which unfolds in the classroom as a result of the engagement of the teacher and students with the content (however it is defined) to be learned.” (p.29) Before integrating general semantics into reading instruction, we teachers need to understand the importance of including the principles of:

a. the symbol/referent relationship,

b. the protean nature of the spoken word and also the speaker,

c. the multi-valued orientation.

Once we have understood the basic concepts of general semantics, we can benefit from curriculum researcher Ralph Tyler’s (1949) Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction. In this classic text, Tyler writes:

In identifying important organizing principles, it is necessary to note that the criteria, continuity, sequence, and integration apply to the experiences of the learner and not to the way in which these matters may be viewed by someone already in command of the elements to be learned. (p.96)

In other words, teachers using general semantics in the classroom act as facilitators and not as “instructors.” According to Tyler (1949), “this means that the organizing principles need to be considered in terms of their psychological significance to the learner.” (p.96)

Appropriate to Ability and Needs

Accordingly, when teachers incorporate the principles of general semantics into reading instruction, they will do so at the appropriate level of the students. As such, the principles of symbols, meaning, and multi-valued orientation will be related to a concept appropriate to their ability level. In this way, students can begin to incorporate and practice this new knowledge into their work, for “it is essential that learning experiences be set up which give an opportunity for the student to practice the kind of behavior implied by the learning experience.” (Tyler, 1949, p.65)

Additionally, equipping students with these principles and techniques will more adequately prepare them to discern between things \textsuperscript{extensional} and things \textsuperscript{intensional}.
(and thus decode many texts effectively, which requires making critical inferences), and to become better writers and communicators. By the same principle, we teachers may find that at certain times a student may benefit more from the whole language approach, where at other times that student will better relate to the phonics approach: student_{September} is not student_{February}. Also, we adapt our methods to a student’s needs: whole language_{1} is not whole language_{2}. Phonics_{3} may include some whole language techniques, etc.

Reading teachers can integrate general semantics into the reading curriculum through questioning.

Educators extol critical thinking and metacognition as desirable and necessary components of education, although they have yet to agree on how to reliably teach these skills. Yet, if educators choose to incorporate the formulations of general semantics stated above into their reading curriculum, students will develop reading comprehension and critical, evaluative skills at the same time.

Reading teachers can integrate general semantics into the reading curriculum through questioning. They can draw attention to the confusion of symbols with the things symbolized. For example, children often think that thing_{1} is always thing_{2}. By introducing texts to help students discern their assumptions and discuss what the writer is presenting, teachers help develop the skills needed to distinguish the purpose of the writing and the role the reader plays in interpretation.

Teachers will find that terms such as “symbols,” “meaning,” and “multi-valued orientation” can easily be incorporated throughout the reading curriculum. General semantics offers students ways to engage more meaningfully with texts, which in turn can impact students’ actions and reactions.

Giroux (1998) writes that “the content of the curriculum needs to affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge forms that students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives.” (p.49) By incorporating general semantics principles into reading instruction, teachers encourage students to take time to think about what they are reading, reflect on its meaning to them, and state their thoughts more accurately and succinctly.

Moving Towards Extensional Awareness

Carlson and Apple (1998) see schools as “public spaces” where different groups in the community can come together to dialogue, both to clarify their differences and work towards some common understandings and agreements
on what equity, freedom, community, and other democratic constructs mean in concrete situations.” (p.18) Although young readers might not be able to converse at this heightened level, reading educators can use general semantics to help students learn to critically analyze as well as thoughtfully engage in the world of print and speech. Whole language instruction and phonic instruction stops short, for these two strategies attempt to teach comprehension, which poses the question: does the student understand what he or she is reading? General semantics adds to whole language and phonic instruction by changing the question to: does the student react in a more extensional mode, which means trying to become more aware of individual language-based biases and how they might influence thought processes and actions? When students move away from simple comprehension and toward extensional awareness, their metacognitive abilities expand as they understand that “words are so important that we must constantly evaluate what they do,” for humanity’s “achievements rest on the use of symbols.” (Ranly, 1992, p.252; Hayakawa, 1990, p.13)

REFERENCES


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