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A Holistic View of Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the advantages of an analytic, constructivist, holistic v. of language learning and training, whether native or foreign, written listened to, productive or receptive. It is a perspective which is in di opposition to the basic skills approach which is so prevalent in curricula and materials today. This holistic position respects such skills only if they not wrenched from the context of meaning and not taught for their c sake or beyond the point of their usefulness. The paper addresses cur confusion about the definition of holistic. Context is the critical issue: set the linguistic forms in a communicative competence framework. It is claim that the fields of language and literacy have focused their instructional materials and testing content on decoding skills. This approach is at odds a the natural direction of language learning: from function to form.

Whatever claims can be made for a holistic approach to training skill is one man who has benefited uniquely from such a position. He is a industrialist in Texas who was on trial for soliciting the murder of h estranged wife and the judge in his divorce trial. Had the jury determin guilty, he could have been sentenced to as many as 99 years in jail. Me dence against him consisted of two surreptitious tape recordings of conve between him and his accuser. Naturally, the newspapers found the ce interesting and, in their inimitable style, journalists selected from th minutes of tape certain passages in which it appeared that the industria indeed, quite guilty. This technique is at least as old as the Bible, in w read, for example, that the devil can quote Scripture for his own purpo

Further condemning evidence came from the State's own transcripts conversations. In written, linear, form, the case against the industrialis pretty bleak. The approach used by the prosecution and by the press c labeled a *synthetic* one in which various parts served as the focus. Th were then put together to form the position that our man was indee The distinctiveness of evidence put together *synthetically* (as opp *analytically* viewing these parts in a contextually relevant whole) was fu lucidly by Imanuel Kant (1949, p. 14), who saw the synthetic approac pansive and the analytical as explicative. In his excellent analysis of tinction between these approaches, Magoon (1977, p. 656) observes that development in Western philosophy in the twentieth century was the method, growing out of the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, in which way to discover how other minds function was by making real-life obs

in a total context, not just by noting instances in isolation from such context. The analytic approach leads to a set of rules that were either being constructed or being followed by the observed subjects. When I was called in to examine the evidence against our industrialist, I took an analytic approach rather than the synthetic one of the prosecution. Thus, when the dialogue read

Mr. A: I'll get the rest of them dead for you.
You want a bunch of people dead, right?

Mr. B: All right, but I . . .

Mr. A: Then help me too, OK?

I noted that Mr. B's apparent assent to wanting people dead had two features which the overall rules of conversation clearly reveal. For one thing, Mr. A's question ended with a tag, *right?* Tag questions almost invariably influence the respondent to agree with the speaker's proposition, whether or not one wants to agree. Salesmen and teachers have used this technique successfully for years (La Paz is the capital of Bolivia, isn't it? You don't want to stay after school, do you? This is a beautiful car, isn't it?).

Secondly, Mr. B's apparent agreement was followed by a qualifying *but* which appears to be an effort to begin to explain what he really wanted to say. Such behavior is common conversational practice after induced agreement following a tag question. We never find out what he was going to say, however, since A interrupts B with his own following comment.

The point of this story is simply to show that by seeing the evidence analytically, part of a contextually relevant whole, rather than synthetically, a totally different interpretation was possible. My concern, as expert witness in the case, was not the industrialist's guilt or innocence but, rather, what the data actually showed. What had looked very bad for the defendant from the perspective of the synthetic position was seen totally differently from the analytic view.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Any discussion of approaches to teaching skills in language and reading will need to attend to a definition of terms. We have already contrasted synthetic (the part reveals the whole) and analytic (the whole reveals the part). Unfortunately, researchers do not always use these terms in this way and, of course, this results in confusion. Likewise, the Kantian assumption that we come to know our world by actively constructing it rather than by passively taking it in has come to be known as *constructivism*. In opposition to this is the *reductionist* argument: that behavior must be reduced to its most elementary parts before these parts can be combined to understand more complex behavior. Whereas constructivists take social context into their perspective, reductionists tend to see the behavioral element in isolation from such context. This is, in fact, the essence of Bronfenbrenner's (1980) criticism of Jensen's most recent work on intelligence; that it isolates the elements from their social context.

The terminology which appears to be most confusing, however, is the term, *holistic*. It is used by some to refer to the whole rather than the part (similar to *analytic*). Others use *holistic* to embrace both the analytic perspective and the constructivist notion that social context must be included in any understanding of behavior or thought. Many others use *holistic* in a

quite special way—as a kind of subjective or unprincipled overview of a of data without making the rules explicit (e.g., Cooper, 1977).

CONTEXT AND COMPETENCE

The *holistic* approach to language skills I equate with constructivist position, which specifies both linguistic environment and social context. That is, such a stance pre- to see the elemental parts (i.e., decoding in reading) with meaningful whole (i.e., comprehension) and within the real social context. The notion of context sets the linguistic forms in a communicative competence model (Hymes, 1974), as Figure 1 illustrates. It is not difficult to see that

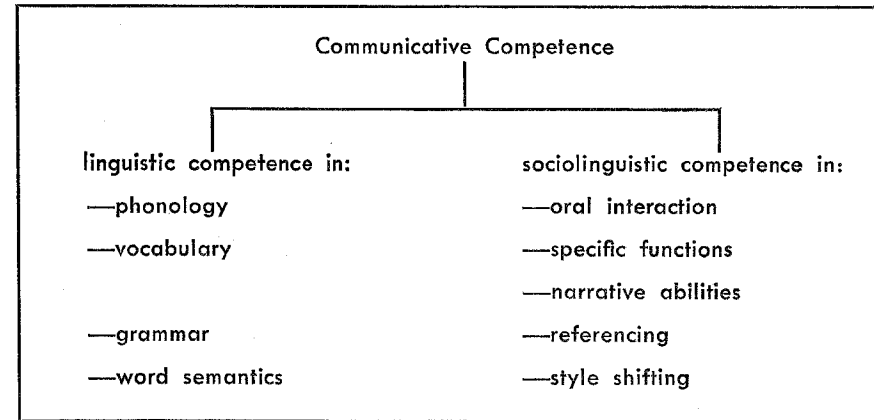


FIGURE 1
Model of Communicative Competence

linguistic competence focuses on the *forms* of language while sociolinguistic competence stresses the *functions* of language. A holistic approach to learning language skills does not neglect either kind of competence, but it sets them in a developmental sequence in which function always precedes form or, stated the more traditional architectural idiom, form follows function.

Language may be somewhat different from other kinds of data. Perhaps this is because language is purposive, that it is used by autonomous agents, that it is simultaneously multi-leveled and that it goes by us very rapidly. These characteristics make it quite different from the physical sciences, which the reductionist approach has mimicked in recent years (Kaplan, 1964). The special characteristics of the social sciences in general make limiting observation to reliable phenomena and isolating these phenomena for individual inspection more difficult.

In the area of language competence, the contrast of reductionist and constructivist approaches is most visible, largely because the clear trend has been toward reductionism and because it is widely recognized that the schools are not doing an adequate job of teaching literacy and language skills.

Miller (1974) provides an excellent frame of reference for the constructivist

approach. His separation of literacy into coding, meaning and function can be very useful, since such units offer a way of assuring what has been the emphasis in literacy research, learning, teaching and evaluation in recent years. One might also borrow the metaphor of deep and surface structure from linguistics and suggest that these components have a deep to surface hierarchy (Chomsky, 1966). Elsewhere (Shuy, 1975) I have used the iceberg as a metaphor of this metaphor (see Figure 2).

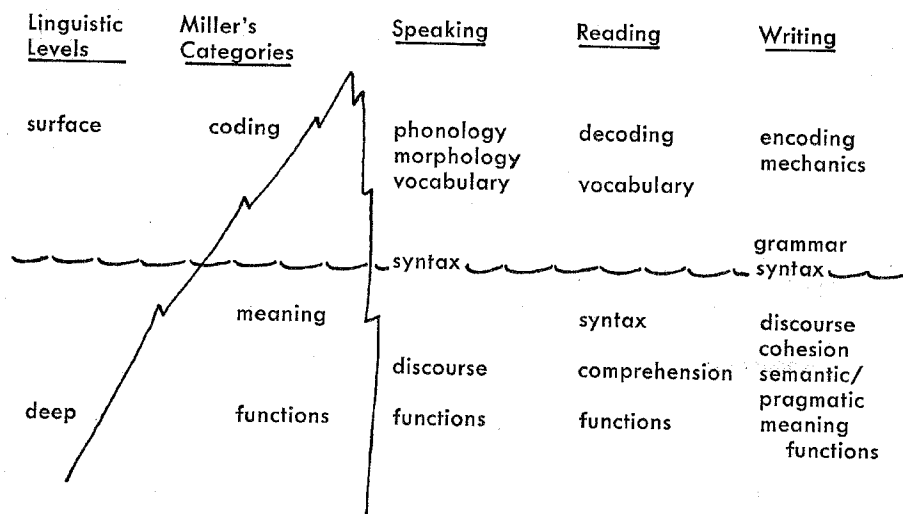


FIGURE 2
A Deep to Surface Representation
of the Language Context Aspects of Literacy

Above the water line of the iceberg, above the surface, are those features of language and literacy which are visible, and, of course, countable. In reading, the visible aspects are primarily decoding issues. In writing, they are primarily mechanics matters. Most standardized testing measures only the surface aspects of literacy, as evidenced, for example, by even the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Much harder to measure, harder to see, harder to count and harder to teach, are the beneath-the-surface issues related to language and literacy: those aspects which deal with meaning relationships (semantics), language use (pragmatics) and text structure (cohesion). Nor do reading programs, commercial or private, address these issues to any great extent. Even definitions of comprehension vary so widely that the term is not to be taken at any particular face value. And, of course, the teaching of written composition has long existed without a scientific underpinning for the art of writing.

REDUCTIONIST PRACTICES

Contextually speaking, then, the fields of language and literacy have focused their instructional materials and testing content primarily on coding skills. (In reading this means letter-sound correspondences, word-parts and vocabulary. In

language study, it refers to vocabulary and pronunciation. In writing, it punctuation, spelling and mechanics.) The underlying learning theory, recognized but present here nonetheless, is that learners learn best small before large things and that by taking natural language apart and by it into little pieces, the learner can best benefit. This is the reductionism, fully realized. In reading, the teaching of comprehension has been thematically neglected, largely because we have not known exactly what how it is learned, how it is taught or how to measure it. (Note the shift here to the problems involving the construct of intelligence.) Evidence of confusion can be seen in existing tests of comprehension which overemphasize questions which require memory of details of a particular passage and emphasize questions related to the general gist or main idea. Even this fits the iceberg metaphor since memory for detail (important or unimportant) is highly visible and countable while main ideas are more subjective and

Still another ingrained educational philosophy, that of mastery learning contributes greatly to this imbalance. Education tends to abhor the notion of being wrong, even if being wrong is evidence of a learning stage which is the direction of rightness. We have learned, in language teaching, that no way to learn a language without being wrong in it and without *allowed* to be wrong in it as one learns the right forms. The beneath-the-surface aspects of language and literacy have a much wider set of variables than the above-the-water aspects. They are subject to less precise measurement and a subjective interpretation. Partly this stems from the grammar of English. In English, a relatively small number of grammatical inflections (-ing, -s) and a reasonably small number of affixation principles (e.g., -a-ity). This results in a relatively controllable morpheme which has a large frequency inventory. This makes it highly recurrent, therefore visible and countable. Syntax and particularly discourse units vary more widely and become recurrent and countable.

In writing, the teaching of discourse cohesion and other discourse units has been sketchy at best, largely because the science of understanding it has been limited. As a former composition teacher at both the secondary and college levels for nine years, I can well remember the ambiguity behind which I hid my skeptical remarks on the papers of my students. My brief notes noted *monotony*, screamed an authority and logic which, if the students had only chosen, would have crumbled with only the vaguest definitions and explanations. It is not to say that the papers were not *monotone* or *awkward*. They probably were, but what it was that made them that way was seldom articulated and usually unarticulatable. As I remember, it was much easier to edit the student than to articulate what it is that they needed to know. Like most composition teachers, I *showed* rather than *told*. Fortunately, this is a pretty effective learning device and many students seem to thrive on it. What neither student nor teacher seems to know is exactly what it is they are doing as they are

FUNCTIONAL ABILITY

The major point here, then, is that any assessment of literacy that we have learned about the skills used in reading and writing has to begin, contextually, with where we were when we began. We were, quite frankly, enmeshed in language

not in language functions. What we have learned in the past few years is that how people use language to get things done is a higher order skill or competence than is their simple mastery of the isolated, decontextualized language forms (phonology, morphology, vocabulary, syntax). How learners acquire this ability to use language to get things done appears to be the major but unrecognized basis of the evaluation of language ability. Some scholars refer to this as functional language ability, referring to the way learners use language in life functions such as requesting clarification, denying, requesting, refusing, asserting and sequencing (i.e., opening, continuing, closing). These beneath-the-surface aspects of literacy have only recently begun to be recognized and researched. In linguistics, the study of pragmatics is bringing to light the mechanics of some of these functions. Recent research at the Center for Applied Linguistics on how these functions are acquired by four-to-nine year old children has provided new insights into the developmental issue involved (see Shuy & Griffin, in press). Conversational analysis has also bloomed in recent years and offers its perspectives into how people use specific language strategies to carry out broad language functions (Sacks, 1972; Gumperz & Herasimchuck, 1975). The primary school classroom has been the focus of a great deal of investigation for several decades but only within very recent years has the naturalistic language of the actual situation been studied carefully. Before this, the basis of most investigation was the researcher's impressionistic coding of classroom interaction and language (see Dunkin & Biddle, 1974, for a literature review). Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) developed a coding system which presents a hierarchically ordered structure from macro to micro-level: lesson/transaction/exchange/move/act. The "teaching exchange" is the basis of their system. The teacher initiates the exchange by asking the child a question. The child replies to that question and then the teacher evaluates the child's reply. This is an example of the ways in which language use in lessons differs from language use in everyday conversation, which is more likely to be organized in two parts (e.g., question and answer) than in three parts. Mehan (1980) describes lesson talk in a similar fashion and draws more attention to the ways in which the talk in the context of schools differs from talk not influenced by the institutional constraints of education.

NATURAL LEARNING

Perhaps the major difference in perspective brought about by the research of recent years, however, is the attempt to recapture the natural direction of language learning, in spoken language as well as in literacy, in a holistic manner. This natural direction is from deep to surface rather than, as we usually teach and test it, surface to deep. Frederickson (1977) and other psychologists refer to this same phenomenon as bottom-up rather than top-down strategies, but it means essentially the same thing. This research shows that good language learners begin with a function, a need to get something done with language, and move gradually toward acquiring the forms which reveal that function. They learn holistically, not by isolated skills. Such learners worry more about getting things done with language than with the surface correctness of it. They hold, innately and naturally, the perspective of the learner. They have an underlying and perceived belief that there is a system in the world. They experiment freely

and try things out unashamedly. They adjust to contextual variables, even an early stage of learning. This appears to be the way we all learned our natural languages—the natural way.

For reasons unclear and almost incomprehensible, we have developed a tradition of teaching reading, writing and foreign language which goes in just opposite direction—from surface to deep, from form to function, from part to whole. Such a tradition is top-of-the-iceberg-oriented. It stresses the visible countable aspects of language and assumes that by isolating these bits and pieces the child can learn them better. Such an assumption is identical to that of most of our readability formulae: that short is easier than long. Flesch (1949), for example, attempts to convince various government agencies that by shortening sentences their prose will be more readable. What this fails to note is that short sentences can be less comprehensible than one long one with clear connections. Linguists call this intersentential relationships. One sentence should connect with the next one. If it doesn't the reader or listener will need to infer a great deal more, perhaps without clear direction. For example, in *Charlotte's Web*, we read:

Wilbur liked Charlotte better and better each day. Her campaign against insects seemed sensible and useful.

Why does Wilbur like Charlotte? We can only infer the reason. If the author had joined these two sentences with *because*, the connection between them would be explicit. As things are, however, there is an implication that the more than one reason. The more this is left open to inference, the more meaning is broadened. This is a very sophisticated process and not one which can be handled merely by reducing a long sentence into two short ones.

From the perspective of context, then, progress in understanding the language skills used in reading and writing has taken us beyond some of the more gross understandings of the past. Reading, for example, is still viewed by many teacher education programs only as a set of methods, and most writing teachers receive virtually no training at all in even the methods of their craft. Research has shown, however, that there is a linguistic, psychological and cultural content to literacy, that it is not just a delivery system and that without such content, which specifies the units of development, no theory or assessment development can exist.

Further, the research of Scribner and Cole (1978) in Liberia demonstrates that literacy gains its power from context, not apart from it. Their finding that restricted use of literacy produces restricted effects is important in that it signifies about the interaction of literacy skills and context.

Another aspect of the holistic approach to literacy skills grows out of research at the Center for the Study of Reading. There it is assumed that the traditional approach to reading, the chaining together of the meaning of strings of decoded words, must be replaced by a view in which the reader makes an individual use of a number of complex mental processes in deriving the meaning from textual material. Building on the support of three relevant scientific disciplines: cognitive psychology, linguistics and the modelling of intelligent computers, researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading have suggested that reading should be understood as a multi-level interactive process.

reader must process the text as a whole, not just the sub-units and, even more crucial, the reader brings considerable pre-existing knowledge to the reading comprehension process. Reading is viewed as a flexible, strategic process which is adapted to the purposes of the reader (Spiro, Bruce & Brewer, 1980). Similarly, an acquisitional model of the language accesses to reading has been suggested in recent years (Shuy, 1975).

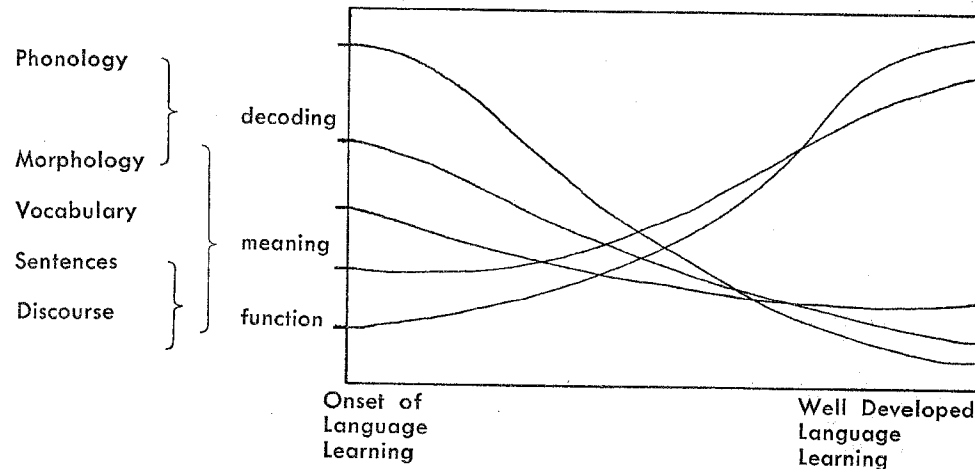


FIGURE 3
Schematic Representation of How Language Learner
Calls on Language Accesses

Such a model (see Figure 3) suggests that different language accesses to reading are not discrete stages but that they operate simultaneously and in different relationships to each other at different stages of development. The reader may focus on one access more heavily at one stage of learning than at another and the decoding focus tends to decrease and meaning and functional focuses increase, giving support to the assertion that early skills are learned in order to become so automatic that they are not conscious to their users. In terms of pedagogy, this principle suggests that there may well be a problem in teaching decoding skills too long as well as in not teaching the ability to process meaning and functional skills at all. More critical from our perspective here, however, is that this language model, while part of a larger holistic model of learning, is also a holistic model internally. That is, it treats various language aspects as part of a whole in which they all have the potential for occurrence. Such an understanding is developmental in orientation and avoids the common pedagogical trap of pitting one method (such as phonics or look-say) against another. The learning experience can make use of all language aspects but not merely with a random eclecticism. In its purest sense, eclecticism is the absence of theory and the model illustrated by Figure 3 avoids such randomness by plotting relative importance of different language accesses at different stages of reading acquisition.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS

In addition to holistic aspects of form and function in language training, one must also set learning in realistic contexts. Language learning should be seen in relation to the people with whom the learner will eventually communicate. Thus one learns not only the language of the target community but the appropriate *variety* of that language. A more cogent example may be the development of what is called English for Special Purposes (ESP) by the Council. In their huge overseas English teaching program, the Council has adopted a method of teaching to adults which sets the learning in the work context. Thus Turkish mechanics are taught English through a curriculum which has as its content the topic of mechanics. Such an approach contextualizes language learning into the learner's world and frame of reference. Support for this approach comes even from Piaget (1972) who recently recognized that for language to be ever universal the stages of cognitive development may be, they are by and responsive to the subject's interests or career field. Piaget offers an example of apprentices to carpenters who are able to reason in a highly sophisticated, abstract manner in their specialty but who would not demonstrate this degree of competence in an experimental situation. The gist of the argument is that to know people's competence best the researcher must search for it in their work context.

Many other social contexts should be noted in an explication of language learning including group identity and setting, occupation, education level of speaker and hearer, appropriateness of social and regional dialects, appropriateness of register (formal, consultative, casual or intimate) and many others. Most of these contexts become decontextualized in the school setting which often argues for uniformity and quietness and conformity, led by a reductionist oversimplification. At least some of such decontextualization are a number of recent studies of classroom language in which holistic observation has revealed important structural elements and hierarchical components (Mehan, 1980; Erickson & Schulz, 1979; McDermott, 1976; Shuy & Griffin, in press). These studies have hitherto unreported structures in reading groups, transition (down) time in selling sessions and classroom discussion sessions. The Center for Applied Linguistics research (Shuy & Griffin, in press) demonstrates, for example, that 11-year old children have an ability to intensify their directives in a different way to high status peers and adults than to low status peers. This study also demonstrates the extreme complexity of the specific language functions of reading clarification, sanctioning and turn-taking allocation. Holistic research on the functions of language, is leading toward a clearer understanding of the surface forms but, more importantly, on how learning takes place.

Perhaps the most interesting recent research in this area, however, is the teaching of English to adult foreign students. Controlling for ethnicity and language ability level, Corsetti taught an experimental class of ESL students using a functional approach and a control class using the traditional form-focused teaching (Corsetti, 1979). At the end of the year the experimental group was vastly ahead of the control group not only on how to use the language in various things done (such as to complain, to request, to deny, to clarify), but on their fluency and, most surprising of all, on skill in English forms (pauses, etc.).

etc.) even though such forms were not directly taught. Form does follow function.

CONCLUSION What I have attempted to project here is the usefulness of an analytic, constructivist, holistic view of language learning, whether native or foreign, written or listened to, productive or receptive. It is a perspective which is in reaction against aspects of basic skills of the top-of-the-iceberg variety which have been extended beyond their limits. It is a position which respects such skills only if they are not wrenched from the context of meaning, for there is nothing in language if there is not meaning. Unfortunately reductionist approaches usually lose sight of their calling and, because there is a bit of truth in them, they are extended inappropriately.

There is a tendency in education, as in life, to over-generalize from a problem right past the answer and to create a problem at the opposite end of the continuum. If there is chaos in the classroom we should seek organization, not ritual. If there is noise we should seek natural noise, not silence. If there is fluidity, we should seek flexibility, not stability. If there is conflict, we should seek reasonable dispute, not absolute agreement. If there is anarchy, we should seek negotiation, not control. It appears that our search for accountability and objectivity has led us to the top of the iceberg, to the forms, isolated from their larger contexts where we should have been seeing first the holistic functions in the natural contexts of life. It is no small accident that one of the recent discoveries about teachers' effectiveness is their ability to use conversational style in the classroom rather than stilted teacher talk. It is also no small accident that in counselling we have learned about the ability to make choices which context always brings. Overfocus becomes focus on itself. And we tend to forget why we are doing what we are doing.

Recently the research team of Sesame Street was field testing a program in which they were trying to teach same or different discrimination by the rules of visual processing. It was decided to present three circles and a square and to determine whether or not the children would see them as different. The four shapes were presented one at a time and the children simply could not see the difference. Then somebody got the bright idea of presenting the three circles and one square together at the same time. The contrast was, of course, immediately clear to the children. If visual rules acquire a holistic processing, why don't language rules do this as well?

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