What is it children should be able to do with language?

Developing children's language through content area activities

by Sarah Hudelson

In recent years, the term language development has been used in a variety of ways. One way to conceive of language development is in terms of the ways in which people use language, the functions that language serves humans. What does an adult language user do with language, and, therefore, what is it that children should be able to do with language? This question will be approached from the points of view of three people. Some of their ideas will be summarized and suggestions will be offered about ways classroom activities in content areas provide children opportunities to use language in specific kinds of ways.

M.A.K. Halliday delineates several ways in which language functions for people (1973). One function is the instrumental one. Language is used to ask for something. A second function Halliday defines is a regulatory function. It is a do as I tell you function. A third function that Halliday deals with is the social or interactional function. People use language to maintain their contacts with other people. Halliday also mentions the personal function of language. The focus is here I am and I am distinct from anyone else in the world. Sometimes this expression of self is most concerned with clarifying oneself to oneself. The personal function, then, emphasizes communication with oneself as well as with others.

Halliday also defines a heuristic function. People use language to ask questions, to explore and to question the environment. A sixth function is an imaginative or let's pretend function. Humans think about and imagine worlds other than the one they are in. The last function considered by Halliday is the representational function, using language to let other people know what you know. Language is used to inform other people about who we are and what we think. Halliday sees people as utilizing language in these basic ways.

A second author who considers language aims is James Kinneavy (1971), who defined four basic functions or aims of language. First, people use language in a referential way, which is similar to Halliday's idea of using language to represent something. Language is used to give and to receive information. Language may be used to narrate events, to share ideas, to talk about activities and so on. Second, Kinneavy offers the persuasive aim. Kinneavy suggests that people use language not only to express their opinions but also to coerce others to certain actions or to certain opinions. The third aim that Kinneavy considers is that of self expression. People use language in self reflection, which involves thinking to oneself, talking to oneself, working through one's self, thoughts and values. These reflections may be shared or may be kept private. The fourth aim that Kinneavy offers is the literary aim. His focus is on the creative aspect of language and the enjoyment of language for its own sake. This may involve, for example, viewing a sunset and expressing joy in it in a literary, composed way. One may use poetry, story form, songs, limericks and so on. Oral as well as written language may be literary in form.

In a volume that emphasizes realistic language use in classroom settings, Britton (1970) suggests that language users take both participant and spectator roles as they use language. As participants, language users are concerned with the clarity with which they send a message to other people. The participant role involves more of the representational, heuristic and interactional functions and the referential and persuasive aims. The focus is clarity of communication. How am I communicating to you? Do you know what my opinions are? Have I given you enough information? The participant uses language to ask questions, to inform and to regulate others' behaviors and thoughts. Conversely in the spectator role the user turns inward. Language is used to examine feelings, ideas, values, joys and pleasures. Language expresses the self first in a way that is pleasurable to the individual and then in ways that may be shared with other people. This stepping back and working things out seems to fit more into the ideas of seeing language use as encompassing the self-expressive, imaginative and literary aims.

Halliday and Kinneavy, then, propose that people use language in various ways. Britton separates these purposes into particular roles that a person assumes in various contexts. These ideas may be combined to describe what people do with language, whether in oral or written form.

The first function is the **informational** function. People use language to ask questions, to find out information. Often this occurs (as Halliday's interactional function points) in social situations.

The second major function may be called a **persuasive** function (a combination of regulatory, instrumental, personal and representational aims of language). The focus is the expression of opinions in attempts to get others to express their ideas, to reach concensus, to formulate a plan of action and so on.

The third major function of language is that of **personal expression**, stepping back from situations and thinking them through (or talking or writing them through). Talking to oneself is a perfect example of the personal expression function of language. Language is used to express ourselves, both to ourselves and to others. In sharing opinions, values and emotions, we move from a strictly information giving function into a function of personal expression.

The final function language serves is that of **literary-creative** function. People use language in a composing fashion, to create or to recreate something that has had

meaning for them. The literary function involves observing and then organizing a composition of some sort. To play with language, to consider special effects that one may create with language, to take one's ideas and to recreate them with a specific audience in mind, all are involved in the literary-creative function of language.

Adults certainly use language in these ways. For example, when the President speaks to the nation, he uses language in informative and persuasive ways. He asks questions, he provides information, he tries to persuade people to adopt his point of view. He shares personal values. And images such as "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country" are typical of literary language. Effective adult language users use language in a variety of ways. It is appropriate, then, for teachers to consider ways in which they may facilitate opportunities for children to practice these uses of language. This means organizing classrooms so that the activities in which children participate provide them opportunities to use language for different reasons. This may be done through content areas. Many activities suggested in the teachers' guides of existing content area materials, would, if used, provide these opportunities. Let's consider a few examples, pulled from commercial texts currently in use in public school.

Science lessons may provide language experiences. Consider a primary science unit on seed germination. In small groups, children decide on several places to plant seeds. The children share what they know about good conditions for seed growth (using language in an informative way). The groups then resolve where they will plant the seeds (informing and persuading). Group hypotheses about germination results may be recorded (informing), as well as oral and written records kept of how well seeds germinate under certain conditions (informing). As they compare results to determine which conditions were most favorable for germination and growth, children use language in informing and persuading ways. (Note that often it is difficult, even impossible, to arbitrarily separate one function from another.) To extend language use to the literary and self-expressive functions, the teacher may share the book **The Carrot Seed** (Krauss, 1945). This might lead to a discussion of how individual children would feel if they were the little boy in the story (self-expression), or to the creation of stories (literary). Children might imagine themselves as seeds and describe, orally or in writing, how they would feel as they broke ground, what the sun would be like, etc. (self-expressive and literary).

Intermediate math/science material on measurement also provides languaging opportunities. To arrive at the need for standard measurement, small groups of children receive pencils or slips of paper lengths. Each child is measured using the particular unit, and then the groups compare their measurements (informing). They begin to see that, without a standard unit, they can't compare their measurements. They may then respond to the question of the need for standard measurements (informing and persuading). A discussion of the merits of metric versus nonmetric measurement might be organized. Pupils try to convince their peers that one system should be adopted by everyone (informing and persuading). To extend this theme into the literary-expressive aims, play the song "Inch Worm, Inch Worm." Share Leo Lionni's book **Inch by Inch** (1960). Having heard the song and/or read the book, have pupils imagine themselves as the tiny crea-

tures. How would they view the world? (self-expressive-literary)

Consider some fourth grade social studies material. The chapter concentrates on markets, buyers, sellers and the chain of production-consumption. To illustrate the interdependence of producers and consumers, each pupil receives a three by five card on which a particular role has been written. The pupils share their roles and organize themselves into pairs or groups by matching themselves with others whose roles connect to theirs. There may be several "correct" combinations. Groups may organize and role play situations involving production, selling and consumer demand (informing/persuading/literizing). To focus on demand and supply, groups may invent new products and construct their own advertising slogans and commercials (persuasive and literary functions).

An art activity involving creating secondary colors from primary colors may also include the use of language in several ways. Pupils begin by hypothesizing about what colors will be created by combining the basic ones. As the new colors are created, pupils record what actually happened (informing). Then the children may use the colors in an art project, choosing the colors they want to use and sharing with others in an informal way what their favorites are and why (self-expression). The teacher might then use an idea from Kenneth Koch's **Wishes, Lies and Dreams** (1970) and have students create poems from the lines Red is . . . . . . , Yellow is . . . . . . , Green is . . . . . . and so on (literizing).

These are a few examples of ways in which language development may be facilitated through content area activities. In all of them, the focus is on process (the languaging) not product. The objective is doing the activity, not coming up with the right answer. All involve children in activities. Children do and talk and talk and do. They are active participants in a process, not passive receptacles for a variety of facts. The situations are contextful. The teacher is the facilitator for children's efforts, not the Big T, the possessor of an unending stream of knowledge.

Recently a colleague shared a comment from one of his children's teachers. The teacher said that schools were spending so much time teaching the basics of reading and math that there was no time for the fun things like science, social studies and art. I would respond that these fun areas are not frills but are basic. Through them we may facilitate our children becoming effective users of language. And I know of nothing more basic than that.

References

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