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ERIC/RCS Report: Evaluating Language Development

by Fran Lehr

Educational Resources Information Center

Recent child language research indicates that by the time children enter school they are amazingly competent communicators. They are, Menyuk (ED 193 645) argues, intuitive grammarians who develop and test hypotheses about the structures of language based on what they hear and the responses they get when speaking. A major task facing educators is to devise instruction that will enhance rather than inhibit children's natural language growth. Well-planned evaluation is central to such a task.

Standardized tests

In a report prepared for Britain's National Association for the teaching of English (ED 192 330), Stibbs expresses a number of reservations about the value of standardized tests in assessing language. These tests, he writes, purport to measure some aspect of a student's language ability.

To construct the test, the designer has to decide what it is he is testing. He must postulate that such an 'ability' exists and can be isolated and measured. To make sure that this 'ability' and only this ability is what he is measuring, he must exclude the influence of other abilities from his measurements.

In a critique of standardized tests of children's oral language ability, Black (ED 169 562) notes that they present many problems due to their (1) cultural and teaching strategy biases, (2) failure to elicit children's true language competence, and (3) tendency to limit the ability of children to demonstrate their actual grammatical and interactional competence.

Black conducted a study involving twelve kindergarten children and after collecting oral language samples from the children, she analyzed each for syntactic maturity and vocabulary diversity. In addition, she selected eight overgeneralizations of irregular verb, noun, and

pronoun inflections from the most frequently missed items on the standardized tests and incorporated them into a "Natural Environment Interview," which she conducted immediately after the subjects had been involved in socio-dramatic play. Using props from the play, Black attempted to elicit correct answers to the over-generalizations made on the tests. She also devised descriptions of the children's interactions to show how their interactional competency was categorized according to the standardized tests and by a researcher-developed instrument called the "Interactional Competency Checklist." The results indicated that the informal evaluation design provided more comprehensive information about the children's grammatical and interactive competence.

Effective Evaluation

Arguing that little can be learned about children's understanding of language from tests and testing settings that constrain and isolate language into "measurable behaviors," DeFord and Harste (EJ 267 031) pose the following as the central curricular question that assessment must address: "In light of what we know about language, language learning, successful language users, and written language growth and development, how are these language users performing?" Observing "real language users in real language settings using real language," they continue, provides the best evaluative data.

What should teachers look and listen for as they observe children? Lilja (ED 193 645) suggests checking to determine if a child is aware of language as a means of communication serving definite purposes. Other factors to consider in evaluation are the child's use of baby talk or other "cutesy" speech patterns and the use of time, place, and thought holders, such as "ya know," with consideration of how often they are used; his or her word choice and use of sentence patterns; and his or her ability to structure ideas into clear communication units.

Kolczynski (ED 193 645) proposes using one of two classification systems to organize evaluation—those of M.A.K. Halliday and Jean

Tough. Halliday's system for classifying language includes seven categories of language function, which define language according to its uses and the intentions of the child. They are (1) instrumental, which is used to get something, to satisfy needs or desires, or to get things done; (2) regulatory, used to control the behavior of others; (3) interactional, used to establish and define social relationships; (4) personal, used to express one's individuality and personality or feelings; (5) heuristic, used to explore the environment or acquire knowledge; (6) imaginative, used to create an environment of one's own, express fantasy, and produce poetry or imaginative writing; (7) informative, used to communicate information to others who do not already possess it.

The system devised by Tough, specifically for use during classroom activities, also delineates seven uses of language, then sets forth strategies that serve each use and reveal the child's reasons for speaking. They are (1) self-maintaining—referring to a psychological or physical need, or a projecting of self-interest; (2) directing—monitoring one's own actions or directing the actions of the self and others; (3) reporting—referring to past or present experiences, analyzing them, extracting central meanings, and reflecting on the meanings; (4) logical reasoning—explaining a process, recognizing casual relationships, recognizing problems and solutions, and justifying actions or judgements; (5) predicting and anticipating; (6) projecting into the experiences of others; and (7) imagining—developing a situation based on real life or fantasy, or developing an original story. Tough recommends using pictures or picture books to stimulate children's discussion, which could be recorded and analyzed later. Records of what each child does with language then become the basis of classroom activities that promote the expansion of communication skills.

Using classifications such as these to identify the various ways children use language can help teachers form realistic expectations about the performance abilities of individuals and shape appropriate instruction.

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