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ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT: KEY TO A BROADER SPECTRUM ON THE WORD RECOGNITION SCENE

by William Page

Word recognition has captured and held the interest of educators concerned with reading. It is virtually a preoccupation in the professional literature of reading. Volumes attest to this fact. Many reading people believe they understand word recognition simply because it is a very familiar term. The advent of new linguistic thinking in the reading arena has recast the emphasis in word recognition half a dozen times in as many years. Word recognition programs require continuous revision reflecting recent knowledge, fresh viewpoints, and more practical applications of principles of learning and language. A reconstruction of existing word recognition classifications has led to a new category: environmental context. Consequently, diagnostic strategies using isolated word lists must be reexamined. New teaching tactics beg to be constructed. Environmental context prompts the questions, "When is a word out of context?" and "Can a word correspond to a specific meaning without context?" It prompts the more basic questions, "Is a group of letters or graphemes actually a word without benefit of context?" and "What is word recognition?"

Environmental context includes those aspects of the environment which modify the thoughts and expectations of a reader encountering a word. It

generally excludes context treated by conventional word recognition categories. For instance, environmental context usually excludes the syntactic and semantic context provided by the surface structure surrounding a word. In the sentence, "John threw the ball.," the four words depicted are the surface structure and are not included in what is herein treated as environmental context. Without the exclusion of what is conventionally defined as context, environmental context would retain a redundant quality. Syntactic context, semantic context, accompanying illustrations, and environmental context need not be treated as mutually exclusive categories. The use of environmental context is an attempt to call attention to the broadest spectrum of peripheral phenomena that produce a setting for a sentence. The paper and print, the book binding, the persons present, psychological tension structures, the health and background of the reader, the room, building, city and political climate are but a few of the constituents of environmental context.

In one sense, a word is a unit of size. Graphologically, a word may be thought of as the grapheme or graphemes between the white spaces in a written sentence. Phonologically, it is a pronounceable phoneme combination. It is

a morpheme or combination of morphemes. Language has been divided into size units much smaller than words and much larger than words. Phonemes are units of speech sound smaller than most words. Graphemes are units of writing also smaller than most words. Morphemes are units of meaning, written or spoken. Phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, papers, books, dissertations, and manifestos are units of language larger than a word. The decision to deal with word recognition is not a denial of the importance of these other units of analysis. Rather, it is an attempt to utilize familiar terminology. Word recognition is a term that is prevalent in the literature of reading instruction and this fact contributes to its familiarity among teachers.

Word recognition schemes frequently include configuration, phonics, word analysis, dictionary usage, and contextual clues. The elements are usually related to the general purposes of (1) developing a sight vocabulary in beginning reading; and (2) utilizing the sight vocabulary to bring contextual information to bear upon learning new words. Emphasis has vacillated between synthetic and analytic programs. Synthesis is learning parts of words and putting them together. Analysis, at the word level, involves encountering the whole word and taking it apart. Combined programs involving both synthesis and analysis are most likely to be found in schools today.

Configuration is use of word shape for recognition of a word much as airplanes or ships have

been identified by silhouette. Preschoolers, within a few months of entering kindergarten, are often able to use configuration to identify a number of words including their own names, their street names, sometimes the name of the family automobile. Phonics is associating phonemes with graphemes. A phoneme is a language unit of sound and a grapheme is a language unit of writing. A grapheme is actually a range of marks as A, A, a, and a are variations of one grapheme. Similarly, a phoneme is a range of sounds which differs with dialect, maturity, skill, or the advent of a nasal infection. Structural word analysis involves taking words apart and learning to use roots, prefixes, suffixes, and syllables. Phonics and structural word analysis are not mutually exclusive categories in that both involve parts of words, while they differ in that phonics always involves sound. Dictionary use involves locating the word and interpreting meaning and pronunciation.

Context is usually described as one category. Sometimes, contextual pictures are treated as a separate category of unusual importance to early grade materials. The storyline of a pre-primer is often carried by accompanying pictures. Linguistic information presses syntactics and semantics to the forefront as contextual categories. Context syntactics involves the position and grammatical function of a word in a sentence. If "ball" were the unknown word in the sentence, "John threw the ball", even a preschooler would not be likely to volunteer, "John threw the is."

or "John threw the was." as guesses. Semantic context involves meaning and is interrelated with syntactic context. After the preschooler has syntactically noted that a thing must fit in the grammatical category marked by "ball", he can further reduce the possibilities by hypothesizing that the thing must be throwable. The youngster would not be likely to supply, "John threw the sky." even though sky is a noun and therefore syntactically acceptable. Knowing full well that only the briefest skelton of a framework of word recognition has been presented here, it is enough to provide a background from which to extend the central concern, environmental context.

Word meaning may be described as a continuum with a high degree of ambiguity at one end, and a lesser degree of ambiguity at the other end. A word in isolation is highly ambiguous. A word in context becomes less ambiguous. A word meaning is never sufficiently unambiguous to warrant a sense of true, complete, or certain understanding. Similarly, when a combination of phonemes or graphemes present no meaning to anyone, a non-word has been encountered.

The isolated word, as it is found in a great many lists used as word recognition tests, has very little meaning. The isolated word leads to a range of possible meanings much as one finds in a dictionary. No dictionary lists the full range of meanings that can be entertained by an imaginative mind as possibilities to be associated with a word in isolation. The isolated word is void of the

redundant cues of language. Syntactic context narrows the possible guesses about a word by limiting the possible grammatical functions of a word. The effect of semantic context is to further narrow the possible meanings that can be applied to words that fit the syntactic category dictated by the syntactic context. These two powerful narrowing devices are not available to the reader encountering an isolated word.

Despite the importance of language as the immediately adjacent context required to reduce the number of possible meanings of a word, the isolated word does carry some meaning. If we consider that encountering a word is a case of modifying expectations of a reader, a relatively untrodden path of investigation beckons the researcher. In terms of expectations, a word is never out of context. It is impossible for a human being to encounter a word without expectations.

The word in isolation is often treated as though no context exists. This an important error in at least two ways. First; it foils any meaningful attempt to understand what has been called sheer word recognition. Second; it wastes the use of a vast, intricate, and untapped set of learning strategies. Other implications can be generated from this error which this paper will not deal with. Most of the implications of this error can be eliminated by rethinking the situations in which readers encounter words.

The first implication poses a customary set of hypothetical circumstances. Consider the child

encountering a word in a word list being manipulated by a reading clinician seeking an index of word recognition ability. It is unlikely that the child does not recognize that a test is taking place. It is unlikely that the child is unaware that judgements affecting his immediate future will be made on the basis of his performance. It is unlikely that his expectations have not been seriously modified by the environmental context of the word in the list. Environmental context is present and it may be the significant modifier of the child's thoughts. The environment is everpresent and it foils any test of uncontaminated word recognition ability. Reading clinicians should rethink the situation, and increase the degree of uncertainty applied to conclusions drawn from word recognition using word lists. It is a relatively easy and inexpensive procedure to reduce the weight of relevance applied to the specific procedure of testing for word recognition ability using isolated lists.

The second implication involves recognizing the environmental context as a valuable aid in the reading instruction. When a child encounters an unknown word in his reading in a book, the environmental context may very well play an overwhelming role in modifying his thinking. The expectations entertained as one meets a word in a science textbook are clearly distinguishable from those entertained as one reads a handwritten invitation to supper by candlelight. Directions for making fudge on the side of the cocoa box begot one set of

expectations. Another set of expectations is elicited when one is reading the stage directions of a play. Upon entering a library, the shelf labels lead readers to different shelves. Significant expectational differences occur concerning the very organization of a book. One does not expect an index to accompany a novel, nor does one expect to encounter a plot and characters in a geographical dictionary.

Environmental context suggests an enormous structural complex. The few examples cited only hint at the related areas of speculation. We are touching upon the relationships of language, thought and reading. In combination, these three enigmas represent a set of interrelated structures which are inexhaustible. They do not appear inviting to researchers desiring a neat, clean statistical study. The classroom teacher does not have the same type of choice as the researcher. The classroom teacher must deal with a total performance model of the child. The researcher can limit his activities to a relatively safe model of competence. The classroom teacher can not carve out a manageable section of the child's intellect and discard the rest. The environment is automatically and persistently on the word recognition scene. To take note of it is to recognize a source of pertinent information bearing upon diagnosis, instruction, and research, however unmanageable it may seem.

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