

READING DEVELOPMENT IN KINDERGARTEN

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"Knowing how to read" is a child's admission ticket into society and therefore the question arises of dealing with written language as early as in kindergarten, in order that already at a young age a child will be able to enter the society and communicate with it [34].

Phonological awareness in general and phonemic alertness in particular are in complex mutual relationship with the reading ability [3]. This is an important factor in forecasting the reading ability in young readers [28]. Additionally, it was found that practicing phonological awareness assists also the reading comprehension [19]. According to Morias [20], in the first phase the child uses phonemic awareness in order to study the grapheme-phonemic relation, at first as an injective relation of grapheme to phoneme and later on acquires the more complex grapheme-phoneme relations that change according to different contexts. The more the reader practices the more automatically he learns to apply the grapheme-phonemic rules, and the phonemic awareness turns into sub-conscious. But this influence of phonemic awareness on reading acquisition is as mentioned before, a reciprocal influence, meaning, the phonemic awareness does not develop spontaneously without the acquisition of reading fundamentals and mainly the alphabet [3].

Researchers Nesdale, Herriman & Tunmer [21] conclude that by knowing the phonemic units of the spoken word, a child is capable, when encounters a written word, to map it upon a spoken word. Most children require a formal study in order to acquire skills related to phonemic awareness, but children who arrive in schools with some phonological awareness will acquire reading much easier [22]. Van Kleeck [36] also claims that this acquired phonemic awareness is considered an important pre-reading skill, which constitutes an index of forecasting future success in reading acquisition.

Hummer, Bentin & Kahn [17] have examined the development of phonological awareness and the phoneme alertness in Hebrew speaking children. In their research, the effects of age were compared to the effect of reading acquisition on these skills, and it was found that the school experience of formal learning to read is the main factor in phonemic awareness development, meaning the recognition of separate phonemes in speech. Bentin [3] states that for most children the exposure to the alphabet and reading acquisition evokes recognition of the phonemic structure of words, nonetheless, there are children to whom this exposure is not enough, and who might have difficulties in reading acquisition due to improper phonemic awareness. Those children require phonological training – especially in phonemic recognition.

An important index for evaluation of phonemic awareness is the recognition of opening and closing sounds of the word. Goswami & Bryant [13], and also Goswami [14] term this sounds as critical phonological units for young children in the beginning of reading and spelling process. Good phonemic skills make it easier on the beginner reader

to acquire the alphabet, but the ability to divide a word into its phonological compartments such as the recognition of the opening and closing sound is a higher skill in the meta-phonological hierarchy and apparently is developed in conjunction with reading acquisition and gaining command over reading [15]. Rosenbaum [25] and Tzimels [33], in the process of their seminaries, have examined phonologic skill in the "Heder" (Jewish religious pre-school) pupils in kindergarten age of 5-6. In the "Heder" the children learn how to read by the phonetic method of teaching. A significant advantage was found in those children in recognition of rhyming words or opening sound, but not in the closing sound and in the omission of first and last phoneme assignment.

The development of written language, as opposed to the development of spoken language is acquired through a guided learning process. In the reading learning process, the child learns a new way to mention the same phonological units that are already in his vocabulary [11, 23]. Even prior to the beginning of reading acquisition process a child develops language awareness – especially awareness of two basic characteristics of language.

The first is the recognition that the relation between the marks and what is marked is strictly arbitrary. Meaning, the word is a separate unit from the referent it represents. This awareness is termed "Word Consciousness". Its importance to the development of reading is in that the child realizes that the word and its phonological characteristics such as – word length, sound, etc., are separated from the word meaning. For example – "bull" is a small word in length with few letters or sounds although it represents a big referent.

The second characteristic which is fundamental to the beginning of reading acquisition is the recognition that language is a system of elements (sounds, words) and rules for their phrasing (grammar). This recognition of the systematic character of language evokes additional awareness levels – phonologic, morphologic and syntactic. These in turn, produce segmentation and synthesis skills without which the child cannot divide a sentence to words and words to phonemes and assemble a word out of phonemes [35].

Children who have difficulties in recognition of written words will have difficulties in reading comprehension [18]. The awareness of language recognition as a system of separate elements is not a direct result from hearing an oral language. Children in pre-school age are used to hear and use language in continuous expressions. For example, children are usually not aware that "orange juice" is comprised of two separate words that each one can be replaced, for example by "apple juice". It is conceived as a single word "orange juice" which relates to all juices made of concentrate. The perception of language as a system of single components develops slowly, when this awareness is acquired, the child manages to divide expressions into words and discover the limits of words in the expression [1]. These two skills - word consciousness, that the word is separate from the referent it represents, and the recognition of language as a system of elements and rules, are not necessarily related to each other. The child might possess one ability without yet having acquired the other.

Reading acquisition steps

The beginning reading evolves on the background of the interaction of phonological encoding, decoding and reading comprehension abilities. The two main methods of print processing in alphabetic languages are: the indirect method – through phonological representation; the direct process – through visual representation – the extraction of a word as an entire unit, recognized according to its form, like the word "hello" [11]. The indirect method which is also called the phonetic approach, requires the reader to encode anew the visually grasped letters into phonemes that are suitable and require the knowledge of grapheme (letter) and phoneme (sound) relations. The phonemes integrate and create a phonological sequence which is matched to a similar sequence which exists in the vocabulary [6, 7, 15].

Clark & Uhry [5] bring forth the reading acquisition models of Frith [10] and Ehri [7] that are based on these processes and delineate reading acquisition steps according to cognitive-linguistic approach. In these models one can discern each step of the main phonological or visual strategy the child relies on in his processing of reading material, but he is assisted secondarily also by the second strategy.

The visual clue stage – pre-alphabet reading

In this stage the children rely on the appearance of word form in a certain context, like the logo of a common consumption product. Researchers and teachers believe that the child acquires in this fashion a bank of words which he stores according to visual hints and which constitutes a foundation to decoding the code that comprises letters [29].

The phonetic clue stage – partial alphabetic reading

In this stage, letters begin to have an important role, but children do not use every letter of the word yet. The child associates between the main letters of the word and the form of the word stored in memory. Thus, he extracts the correct word or one similar to it. This strategy does not allow for decoding of new words [29].

The alphabetic stage

The child voices to himself the represented sound by every letter and merges them into a word. For this purpose the child needs to know the letter-sound relations when these are learned either intuitively or by formal teaching. By this stage, the child requires phonological awareness – knowledge of speech tones. In addition, the child must acquire the alphabetical principle – how can speech tones be mapped over written letters. Only in this stage can the beginning reader start reading a new word correctly using letter-sound relations. In this stage reading is not yet fluent and automatic and so makes reading comprehension difficult [29].

Orthographic reading

The child recognizes combinations of letters which comprise a known model relating to the sound. This is the stage of inclusion and of words families. Thus, for example the child learns to identify the group of words which ends with "s": cars, films as having the sound "z" in its end and does not need phonemic decoding of this letter [29].

Researcher Frith [10] divides each stage into two sub-stages: acquisition of reading strategy and spelling strategy, when the order between them changes. In the first stage -

the logographic stage reading precedes spelling, but in the alphabetic stage the child can sometimes spell a word but not read it. In the last stage, the orthographic stage, the exposure to books and familiarity with word forms allows the child to identify words when his spelling ability is still in a phonetic – pre-conventional stage. Only in the last stage, the spelling ability develops, while it is based on remembering of letters combinations forms.

Perfetti [23] claims that today there is awareness of the fact that good readers rely on the phonetic approach more than one would consider. The opinion that children from a rich literacy/language environment acquire reading in a "natural" fashion apparently might be too simplified. The instilling of reading especially in an alphabetic language requires a formal learning of the phonological ingredients of the language, and thus phonological abilities such as phonological awareness are vital in the acquisition of reading [31].

Reading preparedness

The term "preparedness" evolved out of the concept that children development is the product of growth factors related to neurophysiological mechanisms which undergo maturation. Consequently, in the 20's when first grade children had difficulties in learning to read, the assumption was that 'time will have its way' and that learning of reading needs to be postponed. An opposed approach is the idea that instead of waiting for the suitable maturation, it is possible to develop reading preparedness as early as in kindergarten or first grade, but still assuming that till the middle of first grade the child is not ready for formal learning of reading.

In the last 30 years there has been quite a change in the perception of the idea of learning in general and of learning to read in particular. The old models that saw in learning a procedure of instilling informational units stepped aside before models developed by psycholinguists who see in learning a process of assigning meanings to terms by the child based on knowledge he has acquired from his experiences [23]. Early reading is one of the characterizing behaviors of the learning procedure that naturally develops in a child while he experiences. It is very much related to the development of oral language. The child seeks structuring, uniformity and regularity in the printed material around him, such as: road signs, names of stores, names of food items he encounters of a daily basis, etc. mostly, children of 3-4 years old and even prior than that, have a correct reading material orientation – the direction the book takes, beginning of a story, some will even identify the line according to the picture in a book that has often been read to them [12], [30], [32]. The ability to identify a written symbol (grapheme) with the sound it represents (phoneme) is a powerful forecaster of reading stream in any age [2].

The process of learning to read begins, therefore, spontaneously however gradually – the child at first assigns a holistic meaning to the printed material and afterwards refines his knowledge usually with external help; the child learns to get familiar with the components of words and their relation to the oral language. As early as in the spontaneous stage a child applies his syntactic and semantic knowledge in deciphering

printed texts, and in a later stage a child seriously focuses on grapheme clues. Decoding stages develop concurrently with reading comprehension, while basing on the lingual experiences of the child [4, 8]. Thus, "reading preparedness" is part of the reading process itself – which is a cognitive and linguistic process in essence arousing visual perceptive processes [24, 26, 27]. Finally we should emphasize that the educational system in a kindergarten must allow as much as possible natural experiencing facing a written text.

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