

BASAL READER OR LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO SENTENCE
COMPREHENSION: A COMPARISON STUDY AT THE
THIRD AND FOURTH GRADE LEVEL

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by
Jacqueline S. Mandia
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Reading is probably the most important task of the elementary school, since proficiency in all other subject areas depends upon the reader's ability to comprehend meaning. The need for mastery in comprehension is dependent upon the mastery of phrase and sentence comprehension and the crucial years for teaching this skill is at the third and fourth grade levels. The examination of comprehension skills will indicate that no one comprehension skill can be mastered without first mastering the meaning-bearing unit. The need, then, has been isolated: mastering sentence comprehension at the third and fourth grade level.

An examination of the present methods of teaching this skill is incorporated in this paper. Chosen for the survey of methods were what are probably the most popular means of teaching comprehension skills--those prescribed in the basal readers. Two widely-used basal reader series were examined: one published by Ginn, the other by Scott Foresman. Another source of information for examination of present methods employed by teachers of reading was the New York State series of experimental materials for the development of reading comprehension.¹ The specific skills are listed along with the prescribed method of teaching each skill.

¹University of the State of New York, The State Education Department, Experimental Material: Reading Section, Part II (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1964).

In comparison with the present methods employed, this paper examines the possible applications of structural linguistics to teaching sentence comprehension. The specific features of intonation, sentence patterns, structure words and inflections are discussed, along with their possible application to teaching sentence meaning. It is also brought out that linguists have provided educators with factual knowledge and that discriminating use of that knowledge in relation to methodology is the educator's responsibility.

This paper includes examples of teaching exercises at the third and fourth grade levels that would build and reinforce sentence comprehension skills through a linguistic approach. Some of the examples of materials are original, some from newly published workbooks and texts, and some from unpublished sources.

The exercises are divided into the four main signalling systems of structural linguistics and each of the examples in each group serves as a model and can be expanded upon.

A comparison of the basal reader and linguistic approach to teaching comprehension is made and the resulting conclusion is that the two approaches are not incompatible and therefore the advantages, rather than the disadvantages, of both methods are thoroughly discussed.

It was concluded that a linguistic approach to teaching sentence comprehension is by no means a panacea guaranteed to solve learning problems. But when the research of the linguist can be put to use by the teacher to supplement a

basal reading program, a solution to the problem of comprehension may very well come into being.