Reading, Writing, and Spelling in a Speech-Language Room

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I (the second author) have worked as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) in a public elementary school for a good many years now. In the mid 1990s I also became a teacher of reading and language arts. That is, I began to incorporate reading, writing and spelling activities into my speech-language therapy sessions. Part of this move was due to my own growing interest in the language arts (including enrollment in a Master’s program in reading) and its potential as a tool in Speech-Language work. Another part of my move into literacy work was my school’s commitment to improve reading skills in every area of instruction. The use of reading and writing in my room has been a strong support to my students in their reading and writing development, and it has also strengthened my work as a speech-language pathologist. I would like to share something of my rationale for teaching reading and writing, describe my basic approach, and comment on the successes that I am experiencing.

How It Began

I began to become interested in reading due to the fact that a good number of my speech-language students each year also have reading problems. The connection was clear to me. There are elements of language competency that are important to the development of reading ability. My experience and conclusions in this regard are supported by researchers who now assert that underlying language difficulties are the source of many reading problems. As Boudreau and Hedberg (1999) note, “The coexistence of language difficulties and problems in literacy acquisition has long been observed by clinicians providing services to children with language impairments; however, it has only been recently that researchers have investigated this relationship. Studies have clearly documented the fact that children with language impairments are at risk for difficulties in learning to read and write” (p. 249).

At the same time as I was drawing these conclusions, I began to feel that all of my young clients, whether they had reading problems or not, would benefit from reading and writing activities. I saw in such activities a way to provide an additional modality to help focus attention on elements of speech and language use. That is, I saw reading and writing as ways to underscore and reinforce the skills that I am trying to assist my clients in mastering.

With these thoughts in mind, I was delighted when my school undertook to extend reading instruction into every part of the teaching day. In fact, every teacher in our school--from the physical education teacher to the regular classroom teacher--was required to establish objectives for improving reading. This coincidence of my interest and the school’s commitment was just what I needed. Our new initiative gave me the opportunity and support to fully incorporate reading and writing methods into my teaching sessions. Of course, the key concern for me was to make sure that such instruction complemented students’ Individualized Education
Plans and advanced my therapeutic goals. This proved to be easier than it might sound, but oral language goals are easily achieved in written language settings.

Speech Pathologists and Reading

Because the field of speech language pathology is very much aware of the connections between language difficulties and reading problems, it has recently begun to move into the area of reading instruction. A powerful impetus for this move has been the research finding that phoneme awareness (the awareness of individual sounds within spoken words) plays an important role in reading acquisition (Adams, 1990; 1996).

In response to the phonological awareness research, many speech-language pathologists who undertake literacy work have adopted intensive drill-based instructional models. These models address reading and writing in the context of intensive code-based training. Such programs restrict students’ reading to decodable, phonetically controlled texts that march hand-in-hand with phonic skills that have been pre-taught. Further, these programs generally limit students’ writing to encoding teacher-dictated, phonetically-driven sentences or paragraphs. In other words, learners are placed in highly constrained circumstances where errors are least likely to occur. When errors do occur they are immediately corrected, and if necessary the skill is retaught. Most of these programs were developed for severely disabled readers and have a history of success with that population, although transfer of reading to natural language materials is commonly delayed until well into the advanced stages of the instructional sequence. For many students, this transfer may be postponed for years, and many continue to struggle with less structured materials.

At least one program of this kind–perhaps the most popular one with SLPs--was developed through the combined efforts of a speech pathologist and a linguist. As with the aforementioned programs, the Lindamood Phonemic Sequencing Program for Reading, Spelling, and Speech, or LiPS (Lindamood & Lindamood, 1998), is a highly scripted code-based instructional package. The principle difference is that this program involves extensive and thorough training in the production and classification of speech sounds—a course, quite literally, in the science of phonetics—prior to addressing these things in the context of letters and written words. While such programs have an obvious appeal to speech therapists because they revolve around of elements of speech and language with which they are more than familiar, such programs do not address the diverse needs of my students. Only a small number of my students suffer from severe deficits in phonological processing (6 per cent, at this time). Further, such programs as we have described do not allow for the focused natural language use that encourages students to exercise and apply skills they are working on. Nor do these programs allow me to monitor freely occurring errors in my students’ language use.

My Students

As a speech-language Pathologist, I see children with many and varied needs. I currently serve over 60 children. Some of my students have speech impairments: These range from children who need articulation therapy for a few sounds-in-words like /r/, /s/ or /z/, to those who
stutter or have developmental dyspraxia (an impairment in the ability to correctly pronounce and sequence sounds and syllables) and may need from 20 to 40 sounds in sounds-in-words corrected. I also have students who are language impaired: These students exhibit depressed receptive and/or expressive language skills. They may have word finding disabilities, problems with listening comprehension, difficulty understanding question formats, or problems with vocabulary function. Or they may be too quiet or talk too much. They may also have difficulty with language in the area of morphology (word structures), semantics, syntax, and/or pragmatics, and so on. Again, a limited number of these will experience extreme difficulty with learning to read.

While the problems that SLPs encounter are diverse, one problem that SL Pathologists commonly deal with is the difficulty that many of our students have in making the transfer from corrected sounds or language forms in therapy to correct application in normal language use. It is one thing to learn to produce a correct speech sound in a training session, it is another for that child to apply it correctly in less controlled contexts. It is our contention in this article that reading and writing activities allow my students to extend our speech-language lessons into freer settings while at the same time advancing their literacy skills.

**Writing and Language Use**

One of the ways to encourage free language use is through writing. Writing is a very important part of my resource room. Each child writes at every therapy session. Writing may seem like an unusual activity in a speech-language room, but I want my students to extend their speech and language issues into written form in order to maximize their communication and language development (Goldsworthy, 1996; Koppenhaver, Coleman, Kalman, & Yoder, 1991).

Writing in particular seems well suited to helping students develop their competency with phonemic analysis, especially when the spelling of a word is unknown and must be sounded out (Schlagal, B. 2001).

At a very basic level, constructing words with letters emphasizes the phonemic structure of language—that is, it clarifies that there is a sound system of the language that is represented in alphabetic writing. Writing also provides support for learning the specific relationships between phonemes and graphemes. At a higher level, of course, the experience of writing helps make clear how language may be structured to express ideas in writing (MacGinitie, 1991, p. 58).

Meaningful and functional use of written language is enhanced when readers attend to speech sounds at the level of the phoneme and use resulting discoveries about phonemes and letters of the alphabet to guide their writing and reading (Richgels, Poremba, & McGee, 1996, p. 633).

For these reasons every child who comes to my room writes, kindergarten through grade 6.
As a warm-up activity during each session, children seat themselves and individually write a sentence. My rule is that the sentence must contain at least the same number of words as the child’s age. When the spelling of a word is unknown to a child, she is asked to “sound it out.” I ask children to say the target word out loud slowly. Or, if there are articulation issues, I will say the word myself and model sounding it out. Peers may also help with spelling. Children can help each other sound out words or point out the word on my Word Wall if it is there. (First graders can be quite excited when the Word Wall begins to make sense to them and they can read a growing number of words on it.) In addition, there are dictionaries which older students may use. But for the reasons cited above my primary emphasis is on sounding out words.

When a sentence has been completed, the child must read it to me twice for fluency, pointing to the words as they go. Then they count out the number of words to prove that they have reached the minimum goal.

Kindergarten and first grade children (and those who are severely limited in independent writing) dictate their sentences to me. Using classic language-experience technique (Hall, 1981; Stauffer, 1970), I record exactly the language that I am given, saying each word as I write it in clear, appropriately sized print. As I do this I am getting an ongoing language sample and I am also monitoring articulation errors and noting error locations for later work. Once the beginner’s sentence is composed in this way, I model a finger-point reading of it. The child then reads it back twice, pointing to the words. For children who have difficulty with matching spoken to written words, I am right there to catch and support them through an accurate finger-point reading of their sentence. This necessary beginning reading skill (Morris, 1983) is not always well-established among my younger students. If students are pointing to one word while saying another, they cannot use their emerging phonic skill (e.g., beginning consonant knowledge) to assist them with word recognition (Morris, Bloodgood, & Perney, 2003). Kindergarten and first grade teachers are not always able to give the kind of individual attention to children who need to learn this task. When the dictated sentence has been read correctly twice, the child copies it (beneath the dictated sentence) and the sentence sheet is entered in the child’s work folder.

The sentence writing (or sentence dictation task) serves to get students seated and on task at the beginning of each session. But it also reinforces a host of skills. Those who are writing are discriminating phonemes to sound out beginning consonants, medial vowels, and final consonants, creating first words and then complete sentences. Those who cannot yet write are reinforcing concept of word--accurate finger pointing--and they are picking up sight words. For example, Christopher, a first grader and an emergent reader who has just been labeled learning disabled, had been absent for more than two weeks. On his first day back Christopher sat down, opened his work folder and read his last dictated sentence word-for-word with accurate finger-pointing.

Children with articulation difficulties are writing sounds that are (or will be) addressed in their speech therapy. The child who has difficulty with the /th/ sound, for instance, may write “fum” for thumb. I am thus able to document a trouble spot and spend time on it in speech therapy. Further, because I have acquired an understanding of developmental spelling, I am also able to monitor the plausibility of children’s errors and observe and intervene if students fall into
confusion and begin to use unproductive strategies like guessing at spellings rather than sounding through words.

Many of my students take on sentence length as a challenge and compete with each other to write the longest sentence in the class. One kindergarten boy dictated a complete sentence containing forty words, and my second graders may write entire pages. A dictated sentence is only judged too long if the child cannot control it during the rereadings.

Sentence writing has evolved into other kinds of writing, as well. Some students create journals of daily activities at home and at school, while others create stories or write about themselves and their feelings. Dialogue journals have also grown out of this. Students may write to each other and pass notes back and forth while I am doing individual therapy at the speech mirror. One group of second graders types their collaborative story composition onto the computer. These stories are saved, copied, and illustrated. Then the story may be read again to the teacher or to classmates or parents.

The parents of my students are interested in the evolution of their children’s writing. Some have come by specifically to read their children’s sentences, journals or stories. In them they can see evidence of evolving skill in the spelling of words as the children become more complete and accurate in rendering them. They can see growing control over sentence forms and increasing productivity. And they can see handwriting improvement over time.

Group Dictations and Group Compositions

Much of the work of speech language pathologists is focused on correcting expressive difficulties. Expressive problems can be seen when children use incorrect verb tenses, use telegraphic speech, begin sentences with him instead of he, or have difficulty explaining what activity they just finished. Expressive problems can also be seen when children cannot form proper questions, cannot retell or sequence stories, or are too quiet. Such children benefit from tasks that support them in developing fuller, more expressive and accurate language. One of the most useful activities that I know of in this context and one that I have used for years is a small group language experience dictation. These group dictated stories are a richer and more developed form of the individual dictated sentences described above.

True to language-experience precepts, I encourage students to create a story that I record in print; and I write down exactly what is said, errors included. Therefore when a child with past tense -ed problems says “My mom pick me up,” I write it down. As we read back the sentence before going on to the next, she may catch her error; if not, one of her classmates may. If the error still passes unnoticed, there is a third opportunity: the editing phase when I ask children to proofread sentences looking for specific errors. Once an error has been identified, we make necessary changes and practice the corrected version of the text. Now I have a written record of the error occurring in free speech, and we have a self-corrected form of the child’s own language to work with. (If the error is not caught, it will be left for that day. It will be brought up again during a different therapy session when I target past tense -ed.) After each composition, each member of the group will finger-point read the text aloud, with a level of assistance appropriate
to skill level. In this way, the group hears and reads along through the story three to four times. For younger students, this gives the opportunity to absorb sight vocabulary; for more able students, the repetition promotes fluency (Samuels, 1979). Each group’s story is then printed and shared with each of the other groups, regardless of their grade.

I continue to use these stories to focus on particular skills. We play games with the stories for points, counting sentences, capital letters, verbs, nouns, homonyms, synonyms, and the like. Groups will even compete to see who can find the problem/solution to the stories when they are composed using a conventional story form.

I encourage 3rd through 6th graders to collaborate on writing their own stories. Each child chooses a different color marker (to identify individual sentences), and together they choose a topic and begin writing on the marker board. Each student reads his sentence aloud after he writes it so the others will see and hear what has been written. Corrections can be made if errors are discovered during the reading. Reading the sentence aloud helps with proofreading and with decisions about word choice and style (Cramer, 1978), but it also helps cue the next writer into what might logically follow in the sequence. On one occasion my principal observed one of these writing groups creating a story. She told me how surprised she was that the children could naturally pull the story together into a coherent sequence while there were four different voices composing the story.

I ask that these group stories contain at least six to ten sentences. I seldom have to remind them of this, because their interest in sharing in the creation of plot leads them regularly to exceed my minimum. In fact, the larger problem lies in bringing stories to a timely conclusion. Once the story is complete, I ask questions about the story and students must read back or identify the part of the text that answers the question. Next I type the story on my computer, print and distribute copies to all of the classes that week. The story also remains on the board for several days, and I find many students reading it out loud when they come into the classroom and wanting to know who wrote it. Conclusion

The traditional language arts activities that I have integrated into my daily work, are somewhat novel in a speech-language setting. Although my professional organization, the American Speech, Hearing, and Language Association, (ASHA) has recently defined literacy problems as part of the Speech-Language Pathologist’s responsibilities, the direction I have taken comes from my own studies in reading and the language arts. These new methods have stimulated interest and excitement among my students, and they have given me new and productive ways of working with speech and language difficulties. My work is primarily an instructional and therapeutic intervention for students with linguistic weaknesses, but it is also an important source of support for busy classroom teachers who have little time for individual remedial work.
References


