A Language Story

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On beginning-of-the-year testing, he was the lowest kid in the school: number 154 out of 154 first graders on An Observation Survey of Early Literacy (Clay, 1993). He could write only his first name, he identified half of the alphabet by name, and he did not hear any letter sounds. He had articulation and language problems. Of course he was referred to Reading Recovery.

He entered Reading Recovery in early September. I noticed that he left off the beginning of many words, giving potato as tato, tomato as mato, Nintendo as tendo, computer as puter, and because as cause. There were other words he could not say correctly, pronouncing yellow asellow, chair as shair, chase as trace, chin as shin, and children as churn.

Also, he did not know labels for many common concepts. He called a squirrel a rat, the sidewalk the walkside, and a piano a guitar. His first-grade teacher had 36 weeks to get him to grade-level expectations. His speech teacher had years. And as his Reading Recovery teacher, I had 20 weeks to help him catch up with his classmates and become an independent processor of text in reading and writing. Twenty weeks!

Just communicating was difficult. It took time to get him to start talking to me. Sometimes it took several conversational exchanges for me to understand what he tried to say. The first school day after Thanksgiving, we talked about his holiday. He couldn’t think of anything to write. I suggested he write about what he ate. He said, “Nothing.” I said, “You have been out of school for five days, I know you have eaten something!” Then he remembered eating macaroni and tatos. I replied, “Finally, the truth.” He began to write but stopped and asked, “Wodruff?” I had no idea what he had said. I asked him to repeat it, but I was still clueless. After several times, I still had not comprehended what he asked. He was frustrated and sighed heavily and leaned his head back. I apologized and asked him to look me in the face and say it again. Then I understood he was asking, “What truth?” I explained that first he had said he ate nothing, but then said he ate macaroni and potatoes, and I thought that was the truth. He was satisfied and went on writing his story.

This experience seems like an insignificant event in a day of school, but I do not believe it was. I do not believe so because from that day on, there was a change in him. He was more willing to take a risk, more willing to talk with me and ask questions. In the 20th week, he was rereading a familiar story, The Hungry Giant (Cowley, 1980). As he read the page about the giant hitting the beehive with his bommmy-knocker, I casually said, “That was a mistake, wasn’t it?” I was not even looking at him when I said it because I was jotting something on my lesson record. I could literally feel his stare. I turned and saw his face and knew he thought my remark was about his reading. He was looking at me as if to say, “What mistake? I did not make a mistake.”

Quickly I clarified my remark, “Not you, the giant. That was a mistake to hit the beehive, wasn’t it?” I watched his stormy look turn into a smile of understanding, and he went happily on with his reading. I wonder if he saw my smile. Could he sense my joy that this little boy had gone, in a period of 20 weeks, from a child who could not make a simple question understood to a child with the savvy to understand the two different meanings to my words? Would he understand the joy I felt knowing that I helped in that process?

I have heard Reading Recovery teachers question whether children with such severe problems are ready for Reading Recovery or if they should be held to second semester. Clay (1991) teaches that a child’s language patterns are most rapidly improved by quantities of one-to-one conversation with an adult and that speech therapy is probably not enough. What could be better for increasing language than 30 minutes a day of one-to-one talk about books and print? “We have known for a long time that conversation in the company of an adult was the best tutorial situation in which to raise the child’s language functioning to a high level” (Clay, 1991, p. 70). That’s certainly what I believe happened through Reading Recovery for this child, who did in fact catch up with his peers in reading and writing.

References

