



The Arts of Language

By Andrew Pudewa

For many of us, the expression “Language Arts” evokes an emotional response; in some it causes excitement, but more often uncertainty, anxiety, or confusion. As with many terms, it has meanings both modern and traditional, but it is likely the newer reference to which most parents and teachers of today are oriented. On one extreme, a “complete” language arts curriculum is expected to “cover all the bases”: phonics, handwriting, spelling, reading comprehension, grammar, mechanics, composition, even literature. Just the list is tiring. Doing it all seems impossible. Burnout is around the corner. At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that reading unlocks it all; that if children just read a lot, they will naturally become good spellers and writers while also gaining a love of great literature. Reading becomes the all-important key to success. No wonder we are confused.

However, if we go back to a more classical definition of the Language Arts, we discover there are actually only four, with two being sorely neglected in schools today. They are: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing, and the latter two are predicated upon the former two. Unfortunately, the “arts” or skills of Listening and Speaking have been lost in the drive for easily quantifiable standards and the chaos of “edutainment” which must compete with the hyper-stimulating visual world children live in today. So let us look at the nature of each activity and some ways to nurture these foundational abilities.

Listening

Is “Listening” really a learnable skill? Few would claim it is not, though even fewer actively work to cultivate this ability. When we use the words “pay attention” with children, what we often imply (or they infer) is “be quiet and look at me.” But is this really our goal? Now while there may be exceptions (delayed, at risk, or hearing-impaired children) for most students the ability to be attentive means to listen, understand, remember, and apply auditory information. This is of critical importance—a basic prerequisite for articulate verbalization, good reading comprehension, and even written expression. Why? Consider: If a child can’t hear what someone else says, comprehend it, and remember it to some degree, how will he ever be able to hear the words he decodes and says to himself, as well as understand and retain a portion of the content? It’s common sense, but because listening skills are painfully hard to nurture in a classroom (or sometimes in a large or busy family), little formal attention is given to this crucial area of language development.

The two most important things that can be done to help children develop good listening ability are: 1) Reduce distraction in the environment, and 2) Read out loud to children—in huge quantity—and talk with them about what you are reading. Although much could be discussed about the benefits of minimizing ambient noises (buzzing, background

music, TV, chatter), suffice it to say that pollution of the auditory environment makes it harder for everyone to hear, and therefore to understand language, and therefore to comprehend ideas and to think. This is particularly important with younger children, whose ability to filter sounds—attending to some while ignoring others—is not yet well developed.

Additionally, it is of vital importance that children take in through their ears a huge amount of reliably correct and sophisticated language if they are to develop a mental database of reliably correct and sophisticated syntax and vocabulary. A quick survey of a typical child's world today will show that media (TV, music, movies, Internet, billboards, comic books, etc.) is a main if not dominant source of language for most children, but it is not a source of reliably correct and sophisticated language. Neither will peers, another main language influence on children, provide higher quality language input. And sadly, many parents today—even the well-intentioned ones—are too busy to have sufficiently long, in-depth, meaningful conversations with their children on a regular basis. What can be done to ensure children have sufficient auditory language input?

We must restore the culture of reading out loud to children, well past the age that they can read on their own, at a level above their own independent ability. Once this was done in schools; teachers would read chapter books to their students for 20–30 minutes a day, even in middle school. No more. Ambitious academic goals and standardized test prep won't allow for such a luxury. So parents must make it a priority in the home, reading to the whole family for an hour or more each day, taking time to discuss the events, places, names, idioms, and allusions in the literature, thereby creating comprehension. Unfortunately, many parents tend to read out loud to children less as time goes on, believing that when a child begins to read on his own, he doesn't need to be read to anymore. But in truth it's when a child starts to read independently that he most needs to be read to—at a level above his own—to cultivate understanding of more complex material.

Not only will listening to good language contribute to better comprehension, it is essential for good usage, both in speaking and writing. Built primarily by ear, the language database of vocabulary and syntax is what provides the raw material for a person to use words and create sentences; simply put, the better the language that goes into the mind, the better the language that comes out of it.

Speaking

Once upon a time, school report cards included a grade for “elocution,” which means speaking the language well. Sadly however, this is no longer a subject easy to standardize and test; therefore little if any serious attention is given to it in the classroom. In the world of home education it fares better, thanks to the common sense of parents who instinctively know that memorization and recitation have value—if only for the discipline they promote. Public speaking and debate are frequently available, and children when with parents and older siblings frequently have more sophisticated conversations than when they are with peers. Were all teachers and parents to know the deep and profound value of memorized language and practiced recitation—not only because it grows the brain but because it creates the linguistic marble for a lifetime—they would make it a top priority in every school and home. Correct phrasing, precise pronunciation, and nuance of expression are skills in the use of language that not only convey and enhance comprehension, they also create the subtleties of usage necessary for truly excellent written expression. Memorization and recitation are essential for developing the deep, internal, core sense of language.

Reading

This we have discussed already, and much is made of the importance of reading “at grade level” as important for academic success. While no one will likely dispute that reading well makes life easier, we must not make early reading a god. Many very intelligent and successful adults didn’t read much as children; some didn’t read at all until their late teens—often the result of neurological impediments usually labeled “dyslexia” or “dysgraphia.” Although many children do need more or better phonics instruction, some simply need neurological growth and maturity. Of course we must continue to teach reading with the best methods and materials we can find, but at the same time we must remind ourselves not to become anxious; reading ability, particularly at a young age, should not be taken as the indicator of either intelligence or future academic success.

Writing

Putting words on paper is of course the most concrete and measurable of the four language arts, because a written composition provides an artifact representing integration of all language skills. While much can be said about the teaching of writing (and we do!), one of the interesting things to note about curriculum over the last half-century is the rise of myriad workbooks purposed at teaching things which used to be more naturally learned through extensive memorization and consistent copywork. Yet both have been thrown out of modern education, deemed to be “rote, mechanical, uncreative.” Historically however, simply copying written English has provided handwriting and spelling practice, while building fluency and stamina.

Conclusion

Though we often reflexively worry about “language arts” from an academic perspective, the basic human ability to use language rests on the development of good listening, clear speaking, ease in reading, and steady growth in writing. Just as children grow physically and mature intellectually at different rates, so will these abilities develop in different ways at different times in our students. It is important to avoid the trap of comparing children based on age, which can so easily create anxiety; instead, we must realize that these essential skills will develop more naturally as we attend to creating the best possible environment and using the best curricular methods and materials—sometimes different for different students. As parents and mentors, let us keep in mind these basic principles, even while we seek to do our best with the technical details of teaching the four Arts of Language.

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