
CHAPTER

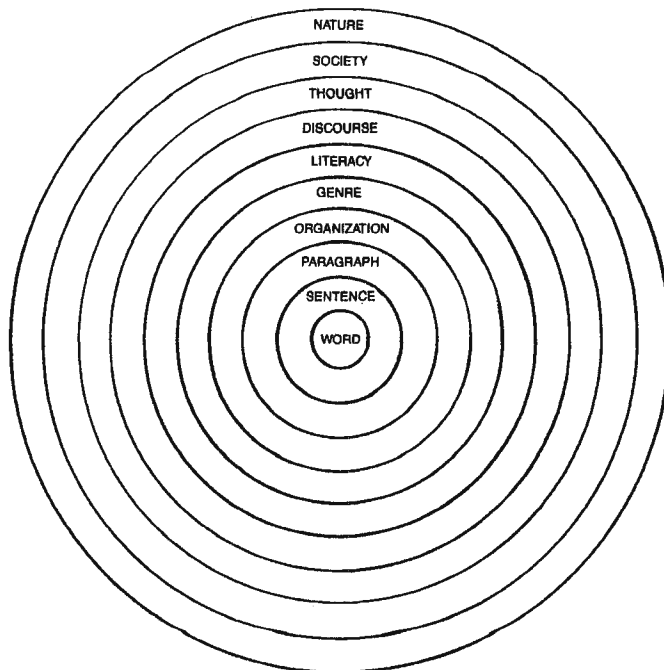
UNDERSTANDING

LANGUAGE ARTS

ONE

The society sponsoring public schools is one of several concentric contexts within which we will situate English education in order to talk most usefully about it in this book. Like nested boxes, every context is surrounded by another, more comprehensive (see Figure 1.1). School itself is a culture within a culture, and a teacher can ask no more pertinent question than what *kind* of a culture schools should generate. Learning never exists in a vacuum but issues from and feeds back into some particular society. And nothing is more integral to culture than

FIGURE 1.1 SUCCESSIVE CONTEXTS



language. American civilization, for example, is multicultural and multilingual and demands a pluralistic school culture.

CURRICULUM REFORM

Originally intended as part of the curriculum reform movement of the 1960s, this book has spanned into a new period of school reform so far focused more on “restructuring” administration than on changing curriculum. This shift of emphasis since the sixties from learning to the learning institution no doubt acknowledges the hard fact that many curricular innovations now being urged were proposed earlier but died out because they entailed more institutional “restructuring” than the public or profession was prepared for. During the twenty or so years between the Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching and Learning of English, held in Dartmouth in 1966, and its later counterpart, the English Coalition Conference of 1987, national awareness grew considerably about how political and economic forces operating in the societal context of schools determine what can happen in the classroom.

The reforms of both the sixties and the nineties began in alarm about the U.S. losing in international competition—the first to Russia over the space race, the second to Japan over commerce. Since Russia’s launching of Sputnik implied a technological edge in the military confrontation between opposed economic systems, it was nationalistic economic competition that inspired that reform too. This is why both stressed math and science and also why the first effort failed and the second may face a hard struggle. Reforms have to happen for the right reasons.

But citizens and educators are calling for reform for other reasons than economic. To a great extent “restructuring schools” takes the turn of de-politicizing them, which as a crude start means decentralizing them by shifting decision-making from remote authorities down to the learning sites. Overcontrol from the top causes the bottom to drop out, as the communist countries discovered. Besides, our increasingly pluralistic society demands a more various schooling, to resist which the old ethnocentric notion of “cultural literacy” has been resuscitated.

The contradictions between our goals and our methods are borne in on us too forcefully to ignore any longer. You can’t spoonfeed youngsters for twelve years in a cookie-cutter curriculum and then seriously expect them to think for themselves, take responsible initiative, and develop their individual capacities. Government and business want graduates who can solve problems and collaborate well with colleagues, but students who have been plugged into programmed learning systems and not allowed to work together will not answer this need. Nor do you learn to participate in democracy and exercise freedom when you grow up being herded and prodded along a track. Either institutional manipulation or the democratic ideal has to yield.

Reform needed to improve learning coincides with changes needed for humanitarian reasons and social betterment. Most children don’t want to be in school, which seems like a prison. You can seldom do anything you want to do because you can’t choose what you do. Incessant testing and grading and criticism keep you in a chronic probationary state that breeds low self-esteem. Starved for some gratification, you may turn to drugs or to thoughtless sex. The boredom and depersonalization may make you crave the excitement of violence and crime and at the same time blunt you to the effects of it.

Any institution may dispirit the individual if it plans its activities so specifically as to drive out spontaneity and vitality. This can especially devastate children if they have no other resources to fall back on, as increasingly few do today. Schools need to treat children far better, to take seriously their human rights, and even become their advocates. More than any other change, honoring the democratic ideal in deed will help them learn better.

Reorganizing education must take account of *both* curriculum and the institution, both of which are drastically overcontrolled. If too much is laid out and predictable, life looks bleak and makes children, and even their teachers, feel powerless and hopeless. If school district authorities buy packaged curricula that are in reality managerial systems spelling out classroom behavior, students and teachers lose initiative, will, and independent thought.

■ NO TEXTBOOKS, NO LESSON PLANS

School reform will certainly include the insistence that schools, not profit corporations, put together curriculum. Teachers have to prepare themselves for this by breaking their dependence on the ready-made, usually impertinent procedures that these materials install in the classroom and by learning how to conceive and orchestrate learning activities themselves with colleagues. Buying a curriculum in a package conflicts with the goals of the language arts because it falsifies the very nature of verbal learning. It is a common observation that the more experienced, confident, and successful teachers become, the less they rely on commercial programs, if they can avoid them. These textbook series or other programs are produced and purchased by people outside the classroom for economic, bureaucratic, and political purposes that inevitably spoil them for educational purposes. Increasingly, professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English are warning teachers about commercial programs. In 1990 its Commission on Language said

Even the newest editions continue to artificially separate the strands of the language arts, disproportionately stressing formal grammatical terminology and prescriptive usage. They misrepresent the true, complex, and fascinating nature of language, and they steal time from valuable class activities such as reading, writing, and talking about language.²

Some state departments of education are refusing to adopt publishers' offerings in certain areas as a kind of consumer revolt and are making their curriculum guidelines more independent of commercial materials. Basal readers, for example, seem definitely on the way out in the movement away from "reading instruction" to children's literature. Likewise, at secondary, grammar-composition textbooks will no doubt phase out also in favor of learning to write by writing via a process approach and writing groups.

The truth is that the conditions and practices that professionals in language education are agreeing on don't lend themselves to incarnation in prepared mate-

² Stephen Piazza and Charles Suhor, comps., "Trends and Issues," in *English Instruction, 1990—Six Summaries* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English), ED 315 793, p.10.

rials. *Functionally* learning grammar and vocabulary, word recognition and spelling, through direct practice of the language arts themselves, can no more be programmed in advance than, say, reader response to literature, which is incompatible with the thematic organization and guiding questions of literature series. Textbooks and other commercial packages did not take over classrooms for educational reasons but for institutional, political, and economic reasons that school reform must acknowledge and correct.

For decades schools have tried to teach language by engaging students with materials instead of with other people. Given the social nature of language, this is not rational and has distorted the education of literacy, literature, and composition more than any other factor except oppressive institutionalism itself.

In this book we have striven for a rationale and practices that will enable you to run an effective, humane, and democratic learning environment without materials especially fabricated for schools and without resorting to a single lesson plan per day and a single curriculum per year. Teachers are operating this way and have done so in the past, whether or not they have begun yet in schools you happen to know. As President Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers has been saying about school reform, it will take far more than merely adjusting present circumstances, and if teachers don't help it happen, public schooling may collapse totally.

THE CONTEXTS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

For convenience we began our discussion of the succession of contexts arrayed in Figure 1-1 at the societal or cultural point, but human life partakes of a broader surrounding existence. The most comprehensive context of all is not culture but nature.

■ NONVERBAL GROUND OF VERBAL LEARNING

Language itself begins and ends in silence, the silence of the unspeaking and unspeakable nonverbal world that language can only symbolize. The interactions between material reality and mental reality should magnetize the field of language education. But schooling has tended to ignore these interactions and swirl students around in verbal circles much as dictionary definitions can sometimes shunt a reader about among synonyms until she³ returns to the original word without ever breaking through to the nonverbal referents of the words. In this case, vocabulary seems to increase, but without the meaning underlying the synonymy, the words create a hollow verbalism, and knowledge itself only appears to increase. Meaning lies *between* mind and matter. If you focus on the symbols to the virtual exclusion of what is symbolized, you can't understand the relationships between the two that constitute knowledge.

Any school reform must make room for these interactions between raw reality and language. No longer engaged with the artificial verbal materials of curricular packages, students can engage more with both other people and physical things.

³ The means we have chosen in this book to indicate both genders at once is to alternate gender pronouns from one chapter to another.

Actually, raw reality includes not just nonhuman objects but the nonverbal aspects of human experience, much of which is social and emotional. “Raw,” in other words, means unsymbolized or nonverbal. Many educators complain that the time children spend watching television is time not spent interacting with other people and the rest of the environment—a great experiential loss. Very true and important. But school itself has tied children up in the same way as television inasmuch as it has interposed its own institutionalism between students and the social and material worlds that they have to know before language means much.

The other concentric contexts, going from more to less comprehensive, are discourse, literacy, and the various sub-structures of language such as paragraph, sentence, and word. Each governs those it comprises, as with any set of nested contexts, but all interact with each other. For example, schooling acts backward to influence society even as the society is legislating it, just as writing acts backward on the oral speech from which it derives. We will often refer to this principle of interaction among contexts but for now will just sketch discourse and literacy as other contexts by way of defining language arts as a learning field.

DEFINING LANGUAGE ARTS

“Language Arts” is what the language arts *are*—speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is a set of two productive and two receptive activities—one pair for oral speech and one pair for literacy. Any verbalizing implies thinking, of course, since it is putting thought into, and taking it out of, language—that is, composing and comprehending. So thinking inevitably grounds all four language activities and hence must be considered part of language arts, which are forms of verbal thinking.

■ DISCOURSE, THE MASTER LANGUAGE CONTEXT

It is handy to have a concept for verbal thinking that comprises at once all four language arts. It is “discourse,” which designates any communication in the medium of language, oral or written. “Discourse” catches the four-way nature of verbal communication: we send and receive, orally and in writing. By embracing at once both orality and literacy, comprehension and composition, the term commits us to integrating the language arts and to considering this totality as the master context of the language domain.

A single instance of discourse is any complete speech act or text, that is, any communication having a sender, receiver, and message bound by intention. A discourse, for example, can be a conversation, a lecture, a letter or journal, poem or short story, ad or label. Because a discourse is the largest language context possible, it is the best learning unit, a central point in a student-centered curriculum. Treating the learner as a whole person means treating language as whole discourse, because only a language act complete for its purpose enables a practitioner to compose or comprehend meaningfully and authentically.

Just as an organic gardener grows different plants mixed together so they feed and protect each other, the language teacher needs to interweave all the language arts so that each will stimulate, follow up, and develop the other. Creative dramatics is one of the best ways to deepen and check reading comprehension.

Creative writing teaches literature. Discussing and improvising teach how to take things and how to put things—the real basics of reading and writing.

■ THE SCHOOL IMBALANCE OF DISCOURSE

Considering listening and speaking, reading and writing, as just different ways of discoursing helps us to realize that schooling has not treated all of the language arts equally. It has heavily favored listening and reading over talking and writing—student reception over student production—despite periodic efforts in the profession during the last century to point out and to right this imbalance. It persists no doubt because student production of discourse cannot be uniformly programmed, processed, and tested the way that material fed into students can be.

Within this bias schools have, for presumably the same reason, preferred reading and writing to listening and speaking although most educators piously agree that literacy builds on oral language development. It is telltale that not only creative writing and journalism tend to be electives but also speech and drama. Aside from being too spontaneous, oral language activities are too hard to test in the customary ways. Since things not tested tend not to be taught, talk has been tremendously slighted even in elementary school, where reading rules the roost at its own expense.

If production is not put on par with reception, and orality with literacy, the present curriculum reform will not have significantly affected the teaching of the language arts. The more reading is singled out, the harder it becomes to learn, because it needs both talking and writing. The same for the other language arts. Growth in discourse moves forward best on all fronts at once.

■ DIFFERENCES IN DISCOURSE

The universe of discourse is broad indeed and ranges from utilitarian and scientific uses of language to the most artful and playful literature. Likewise, it extends from public communication to private self-communication. Students need to learn how to compose and comprehend across the spectrum, as recognized in the concept of “writing and reading across the curriculum.” Issues of composition and comprehension vary with the kind of discourse. You need to know what all the kinds are and how they relate to each other so that you can help students to practice composing and comprehending in a variety of ways and eventually to experience the whole universe of discourse.

Differences in discourse derive essentially from varying relationships among sender, receiver, and subject. This basic triad of first, second, and third persons constitutes the superstructure of discourse, as it does for other media of communication. Distance among them, in one sense or another, often makes the difference.

The basic shift, for example, from speaking to writing occurs when speaker and listener are removed from each other in time and space. A conversation is defined by the fact that communicants occupy the same space-time (are face to face) or at least occupy the same time (are connected electronically) and hence can reverse roles as sender and receiver to exchange unplanned speech. A letter is a letter because the correspondents do not share the same space. Time-space distance forces a shift from oral to written discourse and hence from immediate, spontaneous exchange to more pondered, longer range dialogue-at-a-distance.

Entailed in this shift is the replacement of vocal characteristics by some written equivalents.

Various kinds of discourse differ according to whether the speaker is also the subject (autobiography) or whether a true third person is the subject (biography). Similarly, the distinction between soliloquy and dialogue depends on whether first and second persons are the same person or different people (talking to oneself or to another). Not only may one “person” coincide with another, but each may be singular or plural. When the sender is *we*, the discourse may be some committee report or joint memo. The difference between biography and chronicle or history is the difference between *he/she* and *they*. The difference between the social sciences and the physical sciences, however, is the difference between *he/she/they* and *it*, between humankind verbalizing about fellow human beings, to whom it has access by both empathy and speech itself, and verbalizing about things, to which it does not have the same kind of access.

■ LANGUAGE NOT A “SUBJECT”

A language is a very different subject from others in the curriculum. It is a symbol system, not a body of content, and when someone learns a symbol system, she learns how to operate it. In this respect, English or Spanish is more like math than empirical subjects like history or biology. To learn to operate a language well, over the whole range of its possibilities, takes a long time, because it involves the intricate relations of thought, speech, and print. By not including formal information about language, the English teacher can concentrate on teaching youngsters how to speak, listen, read, write, and think about *any* subject. Languages are to say things with. They have no *particular* content, because *everything* is their content.

The tendency to convert the realistic use of language into information *about* language makes of language arts a history or science course—the chronological development of English language and literature, formal grammatical analysis or modern linguistics, and literary-critical terms and analysis. Teaching the history and science of either language or literature cannot be justified in elementary school and in required secondary courses. It is based on a false analogy with other subjects.

Terms, concepts, and generalities about language and literature should have no priority over terms, concepts, and generalities in other domains of interest. No evidence exists, either practical or scientific, that learning formulations about language such as formal grammar will improve listening, reading, speaking or writing. What students need is not knowledge about how English has been and is used, much of which they observe for themselves if allowed to talk, read, and write enough. What they need is massive practice, which the informational approach displaces.

Ironically, the facts of language are best learned via practice of the language. The only way, for example, that speakers of a minority dialect learn “correct” or standard usage is by hearing and reading it and using it themselves in authentic discourse situations calling for it. Except for trivial slips, so-called grammatical mistakes are communal, not personal. Mistakes that are personal are communicative errors of reason and judgment not treatable by concepts and precepts about language. Versatility with vocabulary and sentence structure comes from speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

Likewise, canned intellectualizations about literature short-circuit the intellectual work that the learner should be doing. Defining myth or satire for students merely closes their minds before they have had a chance to respond. Concepts from literary theory prejudice and preinterpret fiction for young readers not yet used to judging and interpreting for themselves. Far too many youngsters in this country can name the parts of speech but can't put them together to say what they mean, can tell you what onomatopoeia is but hate poetry.

The proper definition of the language arts for school purposes, then, is a set of *activities*, not a set of *contents* like those of subjects like biology or history. Language, literature, and composition have to be construed as what authentic practitioners of these really do, not as bodies of information. This fits the principle of using only whole speech acts or whole texts as learning units. Within these authentic communication situations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing students can most effectively develop their command of compositional organization, paragraph construction, sentence structure, and vocabulary. Super-structure governs sub-structure.

Literature rightfully belongs within this definition. But it must be offered as a live tradition that students can enter into and renew, not as a corpus to be historicized and scientized. On the other hand, students should read and write it in juxtaposition with utilitarian and scientific discourse. Though literature is not exclusively the province of language teachers, they usually know it best. As the most artful and humanistic use of language, literature offers the best models and the best means of personal understanding available in any discourse except sacred scripture itself, from which it derives.

Language arts or English should be a kind of epistemological homeroom, where a student can see the totality of her symbolic life. It is the one place where all forms and contents can be learned in relation to each other—the fictional and the actual side by side, comprehending and composing as knowledge-making, spoken and written speech interplaying, language competing with and complementing other media. If the rest of the curriculum is to be divided up mostly by topics, then language arts must be not only the guardian of literature but the patron of general discourse.

LITERACY

All four of the language arts make up discourse. Only two of the language arts make up literacy—reading and writing. Discourse includes literacy, which it surrounds. Literacy specializes discourse into the creation and interpretation of texts.

What are commonly miscalled the “basic skills” are not writing and reading in their entirety but transcription and word recognition, that is, putting speech into letters and taking speech out of letters. These constitute of course the literal meaning of *literacy*. But educators can't afford to think that literally.

■ THE RELATIONS AMONG THOUGHT, SPEECH, AND PRINT

The real basic skills of language are composing and comprehending, putting thought into language and taking thought out of language. These are done all the time orally and were done very well in preliterate cultures. Putting thought into

language—speech—may occur independently of literacy, as it did in history and as it does in infancy. In fact, composing and comprehending do not even depend on language. *Putting together* and *taking together* are fundamental features of intelligence. Putting experience into thought not only can occur independently of speech but indeed must at times, because limiting thought to language would restrict the full capacity of the mind to make sense of our world and make our way in the world. Just as literacy presupposes speech, speech in turn presupposes thought, the most basic skill of all. Put the other way, thought is the context of speech as speech is the context of print.

It's essential to keep in mind this priority of thought, speech, and print, because context governs text. Schools have usually reversed this priority by paying successively less attention to speaking and thinking in emphasizing the most derivative activity, literal literacy, coding between talk and text. But literacy is grounded in discourse; text in oral speech and silent thought.

As we said above, however, such a succession of embeddings sets up interactions among the various contexts, part of which is that the more derivative may act backward to influence its governing contexts in turn, as the invention of writing and later of the printing press altered consciousness. Both the priority and the circularity profoundly affect the learning of literacy.

■ THE CONFUSION OF CONTEXTS

When successive contexts interact—as thought, speech, and print do in reading and writing—they tend to fuse together. This fusion has caused tremendous confusion in literacy education. Imagine thought, speech, and print as superimposed layers, since each is ground for the next. If you try to trouble-shoot what's happening on the top layer, you will very likely assume that's where the problems lie. Because problems *manifest* themselves at the literacy level that students are most often asked to perform on—that is, in reading and writing—the problems *look* as if they are problems of literacy. Because the comprehension problem becomes evident in reading, or the composition problem in writing, does not make it the exclusive property of reading or writing. Thus we mistake problems of discourse for problems of literacy.

Compare this error with looking down through several overlaid transparencies bearing different graphics, not knowing which transparency contributes which graphic to the composite perception. One might easily attribute the whole picture to the top transparency and perhaps not even be aware that several transparencies were working together to produce the total effect, the equivalent of the text. Problems of conceptualizing and verbalizing merely arise in reading and writing as they do elsewhere. This means they can be dealt with elsewhere as well, in oral or even nonverbal activities. By calling these “reading problems” or “writing problems” we mislead ourselves about the kind of learning involved. Most problems facing language teachers do not concern transcribing and recognizing words nearly so much as they do thinking and speaking.

Whereas thought can be matched with speech in a great and creative variety of verbalization, speech can be matched with print only according to fairly fixed conventions of spelling, punctuation, and other typography. These conventions comprise truly new information; one is not born knowing them. Comprehension and composition, on the other hand, are deep operations of mind and spirit. Peo-

ple are born comprehending and composing, because these are part of our biologically given abstracting apparatus by which we make knowledge.

Peel back one layer at a time of the transparencies and you can reach the problem. Go below the text. When composing and comprehending are done orally, word recognition and transcribing can be ruled out, and the difficulties can be seen to be in the verbalization of thought or in the conceptualization of experience. This happens when someone talks with a writer about her subject until they discover that the text she created was unclear because, say, she couldn't summon exact enough vocabulary, phrasing, and sentence structures to express her ideas (verbalization) or she hadn't thought the whole subject through well enough to organize it understandably (conceptualization). She would have had these problems had she been talking instead of writing on that subject. Likewise, a student might have trouble interpreting a text because the vocabulary and sentence structures employed in it or the concepts involved in the subject are unfamiliar to her. Were the text read to her she would understand it no better.

Inevitably, to consider the *succession* of contexts is to become struck by their *simultaneity*. How thought, speech, and print interact in practice must be the focus of the deepest reflection in a language arts curriculum. Most of the controversy about teaching literacy owes to the fact that in the act of reading or writing several different activities are going on at once that coalesce into the appearance of but one, the textual one. A person reading is translating print to speech at the same time she is translating speech to thought. Once habitual, this double process becomes virtually one, so that it becomes impossible to pull print, speech, and thought apart. Similarly, someone writing is translating her thoughts into language at the same time she is translating this language into letters and punctuation. This ambiguity produces controversy about learning methods and is reflected in the very concept of literacy itself, which sometimes means "emergent literacy" or "beginning reading and writing" and sometimes simply what proficient book lovers and authors do when they read and write.

■ THE UNIQUENESS OF LITERACY

Learning to read and write is not an arcane specialty requiring all sorts of exercises and materials found only in school. So long as literacy is defined so as to make comprehension and composition appear exclusive to it, the confusion runs rife and seems to justify all sorts of special "instruction" in "reading comprehension" and "composition." This in turn rationalizes specialized personnel and material and a whole professional establishment. What is unique to reading and writing is very little—the manifestation *in text* of thought and speech.

If thought and speech, composition and comprehension, make up the deepest part of reading and writing, what is left to learn in order to create and interpret texts? What is unique about reading is not the interpreting of what is being said, the comprehending, which characterizes listening also, but the visual processing of letters that must go on simultaneously with the comprehending. According to a widely held misconception about the nature of the reading process, reading comprehension is somehow distinct from general comprehension and thus can be concentrated on as a set of "reading skills."

But if we raise our gaze beyond language we realize that both visual processing and comprehending play a major role also in interpreting nonverbal experi-

ence, in reading reality. A long list of mental activities that any psychologist would consider general properties of thinking that occur in many different areas of human experience have somehow or other all been tucked under the skirts of reading. Recalling, comprehending, relating facts, making inferences, drawing conclusions, interpreting, and predicting outcomes are all mental operations that go on in the head of a nonliterate aborigine navigating his outrigger according to his visual processing of cues from weather, sea life, currents, and the positions of heavenly bodies. Not only do these kinds of thinking have no necessary connection with reading, but they may have no necessary connection with language.

This basic similarity between reading and other sorts of interpretation is critical for education. It means, first, that learners don't need any new skills or activities concocted especially to teach reading but actually competing with it instead. Second, it means that beginners are already learning to read and write when they are talking and making sense of the environment.

Though people can compose and comprehend meaningfully in independence of literacy, the opposite is not true. "Decoding" text into speech or transcribing speech into text when one is not really trying to comprehend or compose is meaningless. Print can be sounded out and speech spelled out with no reference to meaning at all. Some people can "read" out loud a foreign language from knowledge of its sound-spelling correspondences and still understand nothing of what they are pronouncing. Stenographers can transcribe the dictation of executives and creative writers without comprehending the text they are creating. So recognizing and spelling words *can* be divorced from meaning. The cause of most quarrels about the methodology of literacy learning concerns whether they ever *need* to be so divorced when first learning to read and write. Should phonics, for example, be emphasized or even included at all as a learning method?

■ BEGINNING LITERACY

From the viewpoint of the beginner, oral language is the known, the indispensable bridge *at first* to the unknown of text. Unlike the proficient reader and writer, for whom the task has become second nature, she cannot bypass oral mediation. However much sight and thought—text and meaning—may fuse in the adept, the *novice* must link the new visual medium of text to the old oral-aural medium of speech, to which meaning is already attached. Reading to children and taking down their speech are known to help children become literate, and these activities link speech to print. Failure to make this distinction between adept and novice has increased the initial confusion caused by the melding of sight, speech, and thought. The more recent concept of "emergent literacy" acknowledges the need to distinguish the nature of the early stages from the *second* nature of literacy proficiency.

The practical question for initial literacy is how best to link a new medium (print) to an old one (oral speech) so that meaning may henceforth be conveyed in either medium. For blind learners this means associating oral speech with a tactile medium such as Braille. For deaf learners this means matching hand signs or pictures with written words—that is, one visual medium with another visual medium. A person who did not learn to symbolize thought by any prior sensory symbol system would have to associate meanings directly with graphic symbols, as chimpanzees are now being taught to do in a very limited way. If every person

learned literacy this way, then print could convey meaning independently of speech right from the start. But most people will have to match print with speech until, by association with oral language, print too takes on for people the meanings that speech conveys.

Literacy education has been torn apart long enough by needless polarization into the “meaning” camp and the “decoding” camp. It is most important not to confuse what is unique about literacy with the broader things it partakes of by virtue of being grounded in speech and thought. The chief practical issue of dispute comes down to whether visual processing and transcribing of text make enough of a difference between literacy and other mental activities to warrant some sort of unique learning activity for it that matches off sounds and letters in units smaller than a complete text. This is a question we will pursue in *BECOMING LITERATE*. As final preparation for the deliberations there and elsewhere in this book, let’s finish now the journey proceeding from more to less comprehensive contexts, taking up those smaller than a whole discourse.

SUBSTRUCTURES OF LANGUAGE

The overall organization of a letter, fable, interview, or essay is the most specific unit of discourse that is still a whole speech act or text. A speaker or author may give any number of organizations to a letter, fable, interview, or essay according to numerous compositional options concerning logic and rhetoric. Any particular organization of a whole discourse contains parts or sections that develop the subject in some sort of stages, but by the individual nature of composing, these organizations vary too much across both genre and author to describe generally. Sometimes authors choose to label these sections with subheadings as we have done in this book.

The substructure within such a section or part is the paragraph or stanza.

■ PARAGRAPH

Like all other language structures, a paragraph is nested within the one above it, which governs it. This means that the number, sequence, and makeup of paragraphs depend on the kind of discourse in which they occur and on the particular organization as determined by the author’s intent and content. As regards intent, whether a writer structures a certain paragraph from details to large view or from large view to details depends on which strategy seems best to orient her reader or would best lead in and out of neighboring paragraphs. As regards content, the structure of a narrative paragraph may follow chronology; that of an essay paragraph, some logical relation such as cause and effect or statement plus instance.

■ SENTENCE

The next smallest context or language unit is sentence structure, which is the set of relations among words making a statement, question, or command. Now we’re in the domain of grammar, which consists of word function, word order, and word endings. A sentence governs the choice, form, and position of each word in it. One cannot assign a plural or tense ending to a word without knowing the rest of

the sentence in which it plays its part. Whether *read* is pronounced with a long or short *e* depends on whether the rest of the sentence makes it past or present. A choice among synonyms like *decline*, *refuse*, or *demur* depends on the sense and style of the rest of the sentence. Sentence structure also governs punctuation, which in fact has no meaning without relationships among words. Punctuation groups and relates words as cues to their function in the sentence.

■ WORD

Any single word is itself a structure or context, since it also contains parts related to each other—letters, phonemes, syllables, morphemes, roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Again, the whole word governs choice within it. A spelling may relate two or more letters into a blend of sounds (*che*), but we do not know which sound values until we know what the whole word is (*ache* or *chess*). Phonetic rules operate within the word structure, as for the short-vowel-to-long-vowel transformation of *mad* to *made*.

For curriculum, what's important is the chain of governance reaching all the way down to the lowliest particle of a word from the ultimate language structure that is the final authority—the relations among sender, receiver, and message. Composing and comprehending words, sentences, and paragraphs can be done intelligently only within the framework of a complete discourse. Except in those relatively rare cases, noted in *WORD PLAY*, *LABELS AND CAPTIONS*, and *IDEAS*, where an isolated paragraph, sentence, or word constitutes a complete discourse unto itself, none of these substructures should ordinarily be used as learning units, because as fragments they lack context on which to base judgments about creating and interpreting discourse. So students had best work with word particles, words, sentences, and paragraphs only through reading and writing whole discourses except in some game situations mentioned later.

GOAL STATEMENTS

Another way of defining language arts is to frame statements of goals. The following aims proceed from the more comprehensive goals for all communication and information to more specific ones for discourse and literacy.

■ COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION GOALS

These goals encompass all media, subject areas, language arts, and other arts to create a common ground for an interdisciplinary curriculum.

1. Heed signals from all sources.
2. Gain access to all sources of information, inside and outside oneself.
3. Open all channels to memory, perception, and feeling.
4. Find out what the environment shows, what other people know, what records store, and what media convey.
5. Discriminate different sources and abstraction levels of information and understand what each is worth.

6. Tailor messages for differentiated audiences.
7. Enlarge to its fullest the range of what one can conceive, transmit, and respond to and of how one can conceive, transmit, and respond.
8. Find out what various media can and cannot do—language, body expression, graphic arts, the lively arts, movies, and television, competing with and complementing each other.
9. Become familiar with all roles—sender, receiver, subject—and with the varying distances and relations among them—communicating to oneself, to known individuals, remote audiences, for example, or communicating about oneself, firsthand subjects, abstract subjects, and so on.

■ LANGUAGE ARTS GOALS

These discourse goals further specify, in the medium of language only, what many of the goals above stated more comprehensively. They cover all composition and comprehension, orality and literacy.

1. Make language choices wisely—considering how to put things in the light of purpose, audience, and the resources of language, and considering how to take things in the light of the source, intent, and form of discourse.
2. Expand to the maximum the repertory of language resources one can employ and respond to—from vocabulary and punctuation, phrasing and sentence structure, to style and dialect, points of view and compositional form.
3. Extend to the maximum the fluency, facility, pleasure, and depth with which one can speak, listen, read, and write.
4. Expand to the maximum the range, depth, and refinement of the inborn thinking operations—classifying, generalizing, inferring, problem-solving, and intuiting.

These are very compactly stated and so might be parceled out into a larger number of separate statements. Note that they emphasize the individual nature of learning by taking a learner where she is and moving her as far as she can go. The chapters in Part Two treat the language arts one at a time as basic activities and therefore correspond to these general goals.

■ DISCOURSE OBJECTIVES

We shift down now to a lower level of generality where statements of aims must break down language learning into some categories practical for organizing curriculum. The following objectives differentiate discourse into ten familiar kinds covering the whole range of utilitarian, expository, and literary use of language. Students practice each kind by speaking, listening, reading, and writing it. Each kind is defined and detailed in a chapter of its own in Part Three that proposes specific activities for practicing it. This specializes comprehending and composing in ten different ways. (There are only eight such chapters because we treated three kinds together in *ACTUAL AND INVENTED DIALOGUE*.) This book, in other words, crosses the language arts (Part Two) with the kinds of discourse (Part Three) as a way to set forth the learning field of language.

Students should be able to send and receive effectively in oral and written form:

1. Word Play (riddles, puns, tongue twisters, much poetry)
2. Labels and Captions (language joined with pictures of objects, graphs, maps, and so on)
3. Actual Dialogue (discussion and transcripts)
4. Invented Dialogue (improvisation and scripts)
5. Letters and Memoranda
6. Directions (for how to do and how to make)
7. Invented Stories (fiction, fables, tales, much poetry)
8. True Stories (autobiography, memoir, biography, reportage, journals, and so on)
9. Information (generalized fact)
10. Ideas (generalized thought)

These discourse objectives include and go beyond traditional discourse and literacy objectives. Each kind of discourse has traits of its own that will involve students in different ways of informing, communicating, thinking, and using language. The ten areas are such that while working in them students will also be fulfilling the larger liberal arts and communication goals. The discourse areas are multimedia, for example, which means that True Stories might be told not just with words but with a combination of words and drawings or on film with a cued narration. For another example, the data-gathering required to produce discourse in all of these areas will necessitate students opening all channels of information—observing, interviewing, experimenting, consulting sources—and activating all their inborn logical capacities. They will receive and send language that informs, persuades, shares feelings, imagines, explores, reports, ritualizes, analyzes, generalizes, theorizes, and plays with the medium itself.

These kinds of discourse cover the three grammatical modes—declarative, interrogative, and imperative—and the four traditional types of discourse—description, narration, exposition, and argumentation. True Stories and Invented Stories are narrative. Description distributes itself under several of the objectives—as Captions, stage directions for Invented Dialogue, details for Invented Stories and True Stories, as Information, and as certain kinds of poems. Poetry stretches across many of the goals, being not an area of discourse but a way of discoursing about many things. It may be, for example, a joke in verse (Word Play), a rhyming epitaph (Labels and Captions), an Invented Dialogue, a ballad (Invented Story), or lyric (Ideas). This shows its variety and offers many opportunities to come upon it. The other three genres of literature—drama, fiction, and essay—are directly covered by Invented Dialogue, Invented Stories, and Ideas respectively.

This list of discourse objectives corresponds roughly to a developmental sequence of growth if it is understood that students (1) add but never drop kinds of discourse, (2) spiral endlessly among these kinds, and (3) gradually shift the emphasis of their *capacity* toward the more abstract kinds while valuing all equally. (See *Detecting Growth in Language*.)

■ OBJECTIVES FOR WORD RECOGNITION AND TRANSCRIPTION

In order to read and write at all in any kind of discourse, students need to recognize spoken words when written and be able to spell and punctuate spoken

speech. In contrast to the discourse objectives, these aim at transferring meaning between oral and written language, whatever the type of discourse.

1. The student will be able to sight-read aloud with meaningful intonation any text that she can understand if read to her.
2. The student will be able to transcribe whatever she can say or understand orally so that someone else can sight-read it with meaningful intonation.

Stated relative to a student's general development in thought and speech, the objectives can apply at any age. By not following these up with sub-objectives, we wish to discourage breaking them down into sub-skills.

In fact, we recommend that no objectives for language arts be stated more specifically than those here. In the first place, objectives are inevitably translated into tests of some sort and then in turn into materials and practices for teaching to those tests. So if based on discourse fragments, they will spoil the curriculum. Second, the more concretely objectives are stated, the more they say *how* to teach, not merely *what* to teach. Third, the more specific, the more numerous they must necessarily be. The sheer quantity of them may so bureaucratize a classroom that actual learning is seriously crowded out. Teachers are reduced to testers who administer, then score, record, and report on student "mastery" of a vast quantity of bits and pieces. The net effect of this specificity is to focus on low-level skills, such as the surface features of writing, because they are the easiest to test. Teachers have time for little else, and higher language development suffers.

It is certainly possible and desirable, however, to specify further the details of learning to comprehend and compose, read and write. Indeed, the rest of this book does precisely that.