

The Other Guy's Shoes

Children need to practise addressing an unknown audience.

By E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

While the ability to understand language, whether written or spoken, is an underlying ability required for reading, and while language is the underlying reality in both cases, there are some practical differences between conversational language, which is usually informal in nature, and written language, which has to be elaborated.

The nearest example is our everyday experience of radio and television. If we examine the differences between radio speech and ordinary talk, we begin to see what children need to be taught about the special formal conventions of reading and writing in order to become good readers and writers.

Radio talk and writing have the same task to perform. Both are addressed to an unknown, unseen audience. The speaker or writer must know how to do this in order to be understood, and the listener or reader must know the background knowledge that the speaker or writer is taking for granted.

Both sides are parties to an elaborate system of conventions that have been accrued over many years — namely, how to speak to strangers. Before coming to school, the young child has already learned how to speak and listen to intimates — to parents and caregivers and to peers. In those kinds of exchanges, he or she can take a great deal for granted and does not have to be formal and explicit in language.

As children experience the world outside their home, though, the child has to learn this new use of language. Learning how to read and write is intimately connected to learning how to listen and speak to strangers.

Here's an example of radio talk, taken at random. The oral speech that takes place over the radio is so similar to written speech that it can be transcribed directly to make plausible sense in writing.

"What may have been the best weekend of tennis in years ended yesterday. Roger Federer won his second straight Wimbledon men's singles title. The day before, Maria Sharapova won the women's title. The teenager stunned the two-time defending champion, Serena Williams. Commentator John Feinstein joins us now. Good morning, John."

This introduction makes perfect sense as a piece of writing, because it does just what writing has to do — it addresses itself to strangers. This kind of explicit, formal talk is indeed different from the kinds of ordinary conversation that children and adults engage in.

As a parent or teacher, we can help our children grasp what reading and writing are like by practising pretend radio or other audience-directed speeches. In the classroom, the teacher can and should ask children frequently to make formal prepared and unprepared presentations to the class.

This is the best practice for becoming a good writer and reader that we can devise for young children, because it enacts the communicative situation of reading and writing without involving the arduous process of learning to sound out and form letters accurately and fluently.

That decoding task is absolutely essential, but it is a different task, and it is a long-range one that should not hold back progress in language and knowledge.

Not only children exhibit the difference between formal speech and ordinary conversation. Real conversations are often incomprehensible to listeners who happen to be unaware of the specific context in which the conversation occurs. This was very evident in the famous Nixon tapes, in which actual conversations were secretly tape-recorded and then transcribed. Here is a random sample.

PRESIDENT: I suggest that we sit over here, everybody. More room, and, uh - [coughing] Sit down.

UNIDENTIFIED: Yeah, this -

UNIDENTIFIED: But -

UNIDENTIFIED: Oh, that's all right.

UNIDENTIFIED: I had that senator [unintelligible]

PRESIDENT: They're counting on Hubert.

UNIDENTIFIED: Concentrate on Hubert.

Effective speech on radio and TV always clues in the listener to what is needed to make the speech comprehensible. Radio talk transcribed into writing is easy to understand because it gives explicit clues in precisely the way writing must to be understood.

Children need to learn that when they have to address a big, heterogeneous audience, such as a classroom full of peers, they have to be more explicit both in syntax and in overtly-stated background knowledge.

They also need to build their vocabularies and gradually gain a sense of what others in their speech community take for granted. They need to learn these things to be effective speakers and listeners, as well as good readers.

Early oral language enhancement, plus the systematic teaching of enabling knowledge are the keys to later gains in all academic areas. Further, there is every scientific reason to predict that an intensive and well-focused effort to enhance language and knowledge during the classroom reading period in the early grades will not only raise reading achievement for all students, it will help narrow the gap between social groups.

(Adapted with permission from The Knowledge Deficit. Dr. Hirsch, the author of the best-selling Cultural Literacy, lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.)