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*Language and Learning: The Home and School Years*, 3rd Ed.

Terry Piper (2003)

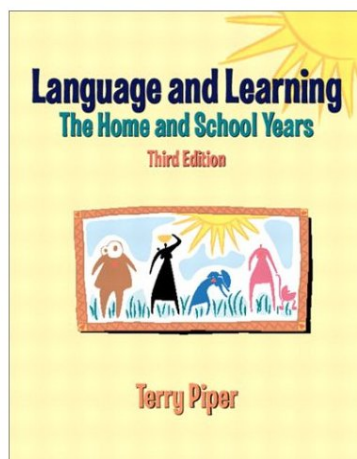
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*Reviewed by Joseph Guenther*



Terry Piper, in her book *Language and Learning: The Home and School Years*, addresses far more than language, learning, children, and the relationship among them. In well-written, though occasionally complex prose, she provides insights into language disorders and their treatment, language development, language acquisition, and the experiences of bicultural/bilingual children.

Piper's primary thesis is that the language development of children is dependent on environmental interactions, including those at home, in school, and in the larger environments. To develop the premise that language is a vehicle for meaningful communication as well as a medium for learning in general, Piper shows the many situations in which learners adapt how to say what they need to say.

She gives the example of Genie, a child who grew up in complete isolation. Most children raised in such environments rarely develop language, as in the case of children raised by wolves. Genie, however, did learn some language and communication skills. Piper also describes how the language of her own child, Janet, develops from infancy through early school years. She carefully shows how, when, and to what extent Janet learned syntax, phonology, semantic relations, grammatical morphemes, pragmatics, and vocabulary.

Piper next addresses the issue of learning two or more languages, which is an unstated but underlying theme in this book. Learning another language involves many variables, including home language, school environment, method of instruction, cognitive styles and learning situations. Piper discusses each of these in depth, and provides several case studies to illustrate each.

One is the case of Grace: the Language Learner. Grace is born as a hearing child who also learns American Sign Language, making her bilingual. When she first spoke with people of the dominant language society, she spoke words just as her deaf parents did, but she later learned "Standard English" through normal interactions with hearing people. Grace, able to

communicate with both American Sign Language as well as “Standard English,” is truly bilingual.

In Chapter Six, Piper provides a case study of Quy, a Vietnamese boat person who had lived in a refuge camp since birth. He was fluent in the Vietnamese language until he began daycare, where only English was spoken. He then apparently lost the ability to speak Vietnamese, giving his mother, whose English was limited, considerable anxiety. His facility with English, however, did develop in school

Quy’s mother eventually resolved his problem of again communicating in his first language. Directly before his third birthday, Quy had expressed interest in a bicycle. He pointed to the tricycle and said “please.” He asked for it in English twice, but his mother did not respond. She responded in Vietnamese. Finally, he repeated his request in Vietnamese. After that, both acted as if it were all a big joke, and had a conversation in Vietnamese. From that time, Quy demonstrated fluency in both languages, although as a rule he spoke the language appropriate to either environment. Quy’s case illustrates that it is through purposeful communication that one can acquire pragmatic utility with a second language while maintaining that of the first.

Chapter Nine discusses language and cognitive growth. It can easily be argued that many of the themes in this chapter underlie the entire text. Children’s language capabilities grow in tandem with psychological memory, in word recognition, discrimination, categorizing, monitoring memory and a variety of memory strategies. Piper states: “It would follow, then, that children’s increasing facility in conceptualization corresponds with their increasing facility with language” (p. 232). Logically, it follows that language also affects all academic progress, including the early learning of math and that of reading.

As a conclusion to Chapter Nine, Piper outlines six characteristics of children’s preschool learning that teachers should bear in mind. These are worth repeating:

- 1) Children’s learning progresses according to their degree of readiness;
- 2) Young children are, for the most part, in charge of their own learning;
- 3) Play plays an important part in children’s language learning;
- 4) The role of the parent in early learning is as a facilitator, not instructor;
- 5) Interaction is essential in children’s early learning;
- 6) Learning is embedded in the process of socialization.

Piper indicts current classroom practices and also gives examples of what she thinks should be done in the classroom. Early educators often bring negative impediments to learning with them. One is the tendency to suppress talk in the classroom, often replacing it almost exclusively with teacher talk. For example, many elementary classrooms have the sign in huge letters that proclaims “**NO TALKING.**” Teachers often believe they are evaluating children’s talk even though it is they who are doing the talking. Many of these “conversations” are stilted, dishonest, and manipulative. While school talk is structured, home talk is unstructured and relatively free. Students encounter numerous dialects and many purposes for communication. Out of school, children learn the vernacular, while in school they are taught in Standard English.

To avoid these problems, Piper encourages genuine conversation between student and teacher. The examples she gives are clearly whole language, child-centered conversations with real communication situations, with children learning language by talking to people about real events and situations in their environment.

Piper gives an example of how she thinks language should be taught and nurtured in a genuine communication environment, one that conforms to her ideas of a good school, not necessarily how language should be developed and structured, but how it should be allowed to develop. This school, Glen Duncan School, emphasizes how students lead discussion rather than listening to teachers, how they wrote newsletters, reinforcing authentic speech and writing; read self-chosen text, using reading and writing as a means of discovery and learning; integrated subjects across the curriculum, making second-language an integral part of classroom life. The entire venture was a communal one involving teachers, principals, students, and the community at large.

With additional chapters on language disorders and diagnosis, literacy and academic language development, and intercultural communication, Piper's book is of interest both to the layperson and the professional. While the level of difficulty of the book speaks to a reader who is very sophisticated and knowledgeable about the topics discussed, the issues addressed are of interest to teachers, researchers, undergrad and graduate students, and parents alike. I recommend this book for just that reason. It can be read on a variety of levels for a variety of purposes, with each reader taking away just what that s/he wishes.

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