

PERERA, Katherine. *Children's Writing and Reading. Analyzing Classroom Language*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1984, 341 pp.

Reviewing Katherine Perera's monograph is a very pleasant task. Let me say at the very outset that I found the book one of the very best professional books I have ever read: very informative, scholarly, readable, and thoughtful.

The author shares the view presented in the British report 'A Language for Life', the so-called Bullock Report from 1975, according to which carefully planned intervention is necessary in order to develop pupils' linguistic resources. Such intervention can only succeed if it works in harmony with the natural sequence of language acquisition. From this premise, the author has chosen the content for the book.

After a clear and concise introduction, which informs the reader about the author's point of view and gives a rationale for it, the author provides a grammatical description of basic English grammar in chapter 2. It is based mainly on Quirk *et al.* (1972) and Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), with occasional use of Crystal *et al.* (1976). In some 75 pages Dr. Perera presents a concise description of basic English grammatical structures. It serves as an indispensable basis for the following chapters. The readable grammatical account can be consulted with benefit also in other contexts where a grammatical analysis or description is needed. The author's decision to use descriptive grammar instead of generative grammar as being 'simpler and more familiar to most people' was a judicious choice. The author has also avoided introducing unnecessarily her own terminology, which is to be commended.

In chapter 3 Dr. Perera presents in 70 pages an account of how children acquire grammar. She shows how the developmental process of grammar acquisition continues until the teens. This is in sharp contrast to the frequently quoted view in the 1970s, according to which children had virtually completed the learning of their mother tongue by five. The author gives particular emphasis to those grammatical constructions that appear late, are used hesitatingly or wrong. This section shows convincingly that pupils may encounter a number of constructions in school books that can cause reading difficulties. It also suggests that teachers should be careful not to overestimate the linguistic abilities of school-age children.

Chapter 4 is an account of major differences between speech and writing. Having done work in this area (Takala, 1982) I was pleased to see the way the author deals systematically with the physical, situational, and functional differences. Especially useful is the discussion of differences in form, structure, and discourse organization between speech and writing. The author suggests, I think correctly, that conversation is archetypal speech and that literature and serious informative prose are the most likely candidates for archetypal writing. She marshals several good arguments to show that – contrary to some recent arguments stressing the revolutionary ways of recording and transmitting speech – it is not obsolescent and is never likely to become so. Writing and speech serve quite distinct functions and prefer quite different structures of language.

Chapter 5 focuses on children's writing. After a brief and selective review of recent work on writing, Dr. Perera presents a schema for classifying kinds of writing. One dimension of the schema has to do with the organization of the subject matter. It is based on a dichotomy: chronologically – vs. non-chronologically – ordered text. The second dimension concerns the relationship of the writer to his or her subject and to the reader. Here we have a continuum extending from close personal (known to writer) through intermediate personal (unknown to writer) to distant impersonal. While this system is, as the author suggests, one of several possible ones

(see Vähäpassi, 1982, for a review of these and for an alternative system), it seems quite well adapted to the purpose that it was designed for: the teaching of writing (choice of topic, preparation, guidance, and feedback).

Drawing on the work by Kroll (1981), Dr. Perera deals with children's writing in terms of four phases: preparation, consolidation, differentiation, and integration. Citing examples from children's writing she shows how writing is first based on oral proficiency. When children can read fluently their reading can be reflected in their writing and can also start influencing the development of their speech. The author also shows how different writing tasks make varying demands on the writer and produce characteristically different linguistic structures. Through detailed description Dr. Perera helps the reader to get a developmental perspective of writing and thus have a better understanding of writing difficulties, particularly those imposed by a frequently required impersonal writing register.

The concluding chapter addresses the understanding of written language. In linking writing and reading, Dr. Perera makes a valuable contribution to the current and rapidly increasing literature on this topic (cf. for instance, Jensen, 1984). Whereas most existing literature puts a heavy emphasis on similarities in the *processes* of reading and writing, Dr. Perera focuses on the written *language forms* that might cause difficulty in reading comprehension. As in the chapter on writing, she presents concrete data on which construction may cause reading difficulty at the sentence and discourse level.

I said at the outset that reviewing *Children's Writing and Reading* is a pleasant task. It is, however, also a difficult one. The book contains a large amount of information which can only be hinted at and thus it is difficult to do justice to the book. One of the merits of the book is that, in spite of its high information density, it is well organized and written with a clear sense of the audience. Throughout the book, Dr. Perera also makes judicious recommendations for teachers.

I came across only a couple of points, where one might quibble with the text. On page 160, when discussing physical differences between speech and writing, we read 'Speech consists of sounds that are produced in a sequence in TIME; writing consists of marks, made on a surface such as paper, in an arrangement in SPACE.' Of course Dr. Perera is not suggesting that writing is not produced also in a temporal sequence, in real time, but that might be taken to be the literal implication of the sentence. Another minor point is when she quotes Sachs on memory for meaning. These points are, however, very minor indeed. Thus the reviewer can warmly recommend that teachers of writing and reading get acquainted with Dr. Perera's book. It is likely to become a classical reference book, much quoted and deservedly so. It is a highly useful book also to those who are doing research on writing and reading.

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