

A Model of Written Language Development for Teachers

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For decades, many linguists have stressed the primacy of oral language and seem to have viewed writing as simply the transcription of speech. For example, Greenberg writes in Psycholinguistics: "The linguist views writing...as a derivative system whose symbols stand for units of the spoken language" (Osgood & Sebeok, p. 9). This assumption has led some educators to believe that writing is little more than "speech written down."

On the other hand, composition teachers, especially at higher levels of education (e.g., Shaughnessy, 1977), have frequently observed that poor writing is often considered poor precisely because it seems to reflect the patterns, structures, and lexicon of the spoken language. Moreover, scholarship in still another academic discipline suggests that academic writing, at least, cannot be regarded merely as an alternate form of the spoken language. Snell, a professor of the classics, points out that philosophical and scientific discourse was deliberately created by the ancient Greeks to develop knowledge because the structures and lexicon of natural language were not suitable for that purpose. He states that academic discourse lives today in other languages "by virtue of taking over, translating and elaborating upon the original Greek" (Snell, p.50).

The claim that academic language is unlike natural language suggests that it cannot be acquired, spontaneously and effortlessly, in a natural language environment, but, instead, must be learned through deliberate exposure to it and by formal instruction in it. Indeed, the practices of most teachers of academic writing would appear to support these views. Unfortunately, what these teachers lack is a theoretical framework that supports their practices. What

seems to be needed is a model of written language development that not only acknowledges the differences between the language of formal schooling and the language of daily life but also suggests how developing writers acquire their competence with this special language. The purpose of this essay is to provide such a theoretical framework.

The model I am presenting in this essay is a synthesis of ideas that can be found in the writing of many different psychologists; however, its broad outlines have been suggested explicitly in the work of Vygotsky and Luria particularly. We might perhaps call this model an epistemological model of written language development because it seeks to explain how we come to know--and, hence, be able to use--the language of formal schooling. According to this model, writing, although initially dependent upon spoken language while students learn to decode and encode written language, becomes increasingly independent of spoken language and more influenced by written language itself. Although the language the developing writer reads is usually far richer and more complex than the language he can write, the model suggests that students' writing may gradually become like the language they read with continuous experience and instruction in reading and writing this language.

The basic assumption of the model is that oral and written language differ in both their origins and in their purposes and, accordingly, are qualitatively different in nature. Vygotsky (1978) writes: "writing...is a new and complex form of speech" (p. 118). Luria writes: "written speech (differs) from oral speech in its origins and in its structural and functional features" (p. 141).¹ Simon

¹Although the word speech is used in the Eng-

writes that written language does not arise as a "twin" to spoken language; it may share some common elements but requires other resources for its full development, using different means to achieve different goals (p. 323).² Bruner *et al.* suggest the following differences between written and oral language:

All the semantic and syntactic features that have been discussed in relation to concept formation—a rich and hierarchically organized vocabulary, as well as the syntactic embedding of labels—become necessary when one must communicate out of the context of immediate reference. It is precisely in this respect that written language differs from the spoken (p. 310).

In order to explain how the language of beginning writing can be transformed into the language of mature writing, the model must address two critical issues: (1) how the reader derives meaning from written texts; and (2) where the writer derives meaning from in order to produce written texts. Figure 1 presents a preliminary version of the model in order to show what happens in beginning reading and writing. In this figure, and in the next one as well, the circles represent the four language processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The direction of the arrows indicates whether the process may contribute to the development of meaning and thought or to an expression of meaning and thought—or to both. As Figure 1 indicates, the language learner first derives meaning from the spoken language of others; moreover, his own speech may also contribute to the

lish translations of Vygotsky's and Luria's statements, it seems to make better sense to understand the word as language, since neither Vygotsky nor Luria consider writing as "speech written down."

²The original passage is as follows: "La langue écrite naît chez l'enfant; parturition douloureuse. Et elle ne naît pas soeur jumelle de la langue parlée, mais nouvelle Eve, elle lui emprunte ses éléments et non pas ses ailments car elle se nourrit à d'autres sources, ne vise pas les mêmes buts et dispose d'autres moyens techniques."

development of meaning and thought. He learns to read primarily by decoding and fusing written symbols into sounds that have meanings he recognizes from his experience listening to the speech of others (Luria, pp. 411-413). Thus, as a beginning reader, he derives meaning from written texts on the basis of meaning gained from experience with spoken language. The written texts he reads with understanding may be less rich and complex than, or as rich and complex as, what he can understand aurally, but they cannot be richer and more complex than what he can understand aurally. What he understands aurally sets a ceiling on, or gates, what he can understand in written texts.

During this period, as Figure 1 also indicates, inner listening continues to develop. Inner listening refers to our ability to "hear" inner speech and would seem to be presupposed by the existence of inner speech (see Sokolov, p. 568). In the pre-school years, inner listening may simply be the internalization of external listening.

Eventually, with enough reading experience, the beginning reader no longer has to translate written symbols into sounds in order to understand the meaning they signify but can understand the meaning they signify directly. The reader now goes directly from print to meaning. Vygotsky (1978) writes:

As second-order symbols, written symbols function as designations for verbal ones. Understanding of written language is first effected through spoken language, but gradually this path is curtailed and spoken language disappears as the intermediate link. To judge from all the available evidence, written language becomes direct symbolism that is perceived in the same way as spoken language (p. 116).

The direct influence of reading upon meaning--and thought, too--is shown in

FIGURE 1

ORAL LANGUAGE

WRITTEN LANGUAGE

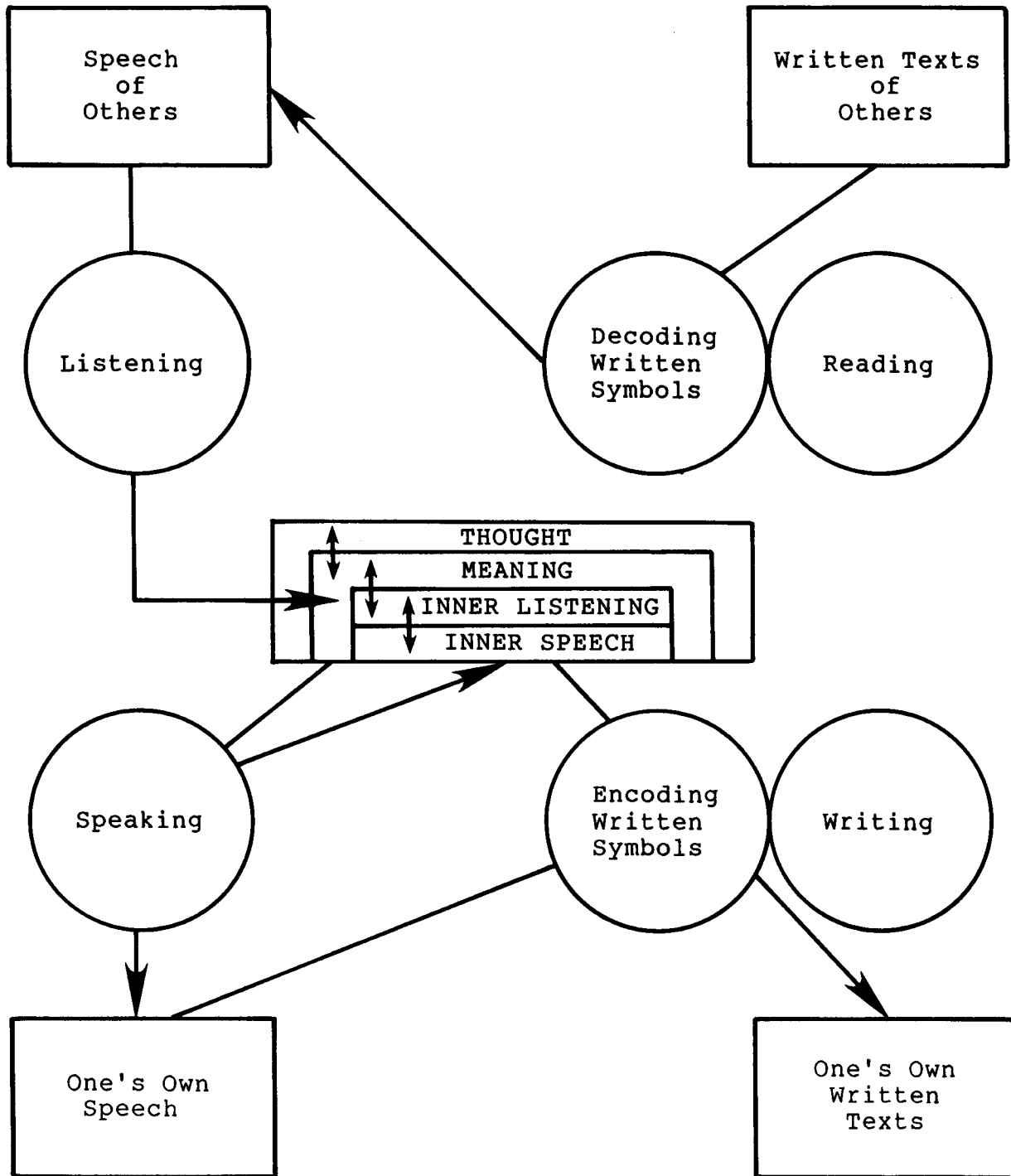


FIGURE 2

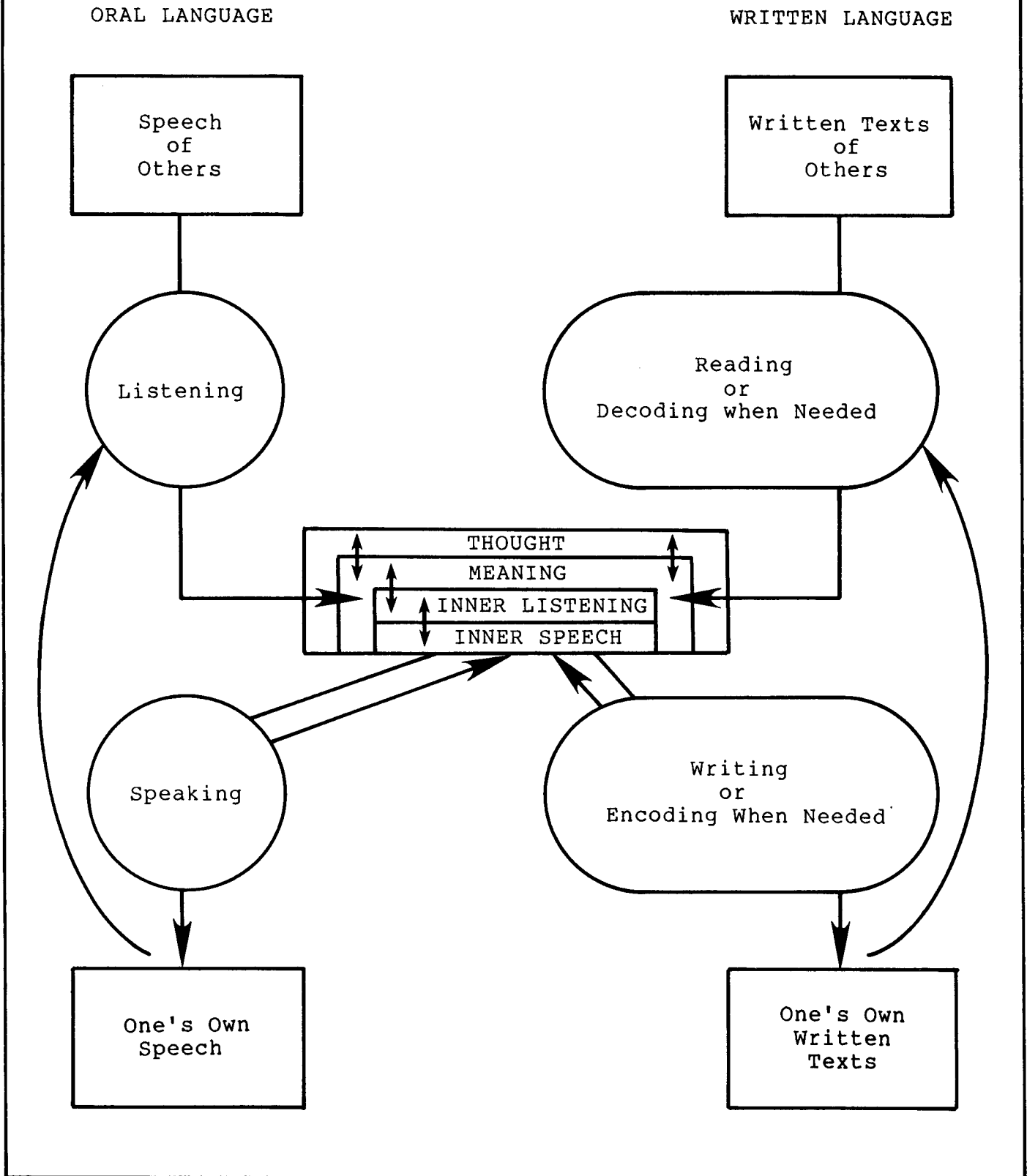


Figure 2, a more fully developed model. It is possible that the development of inner listening facilitates understanding written language as "direct symbolism."

At the point when written language can be understood as direct symbolism, something very significant can occur in the reading process. Up to this point, the reader has understood written language on the basis of his understanding of spoken language. Now, however, the reader can go beyond the limits of his spoken language experiences. His level of listening comprehension no longer sets limits on his level of reading comprehension. The reader now can learn to read written language that is richer and more complex than his spoken language.

How can the developing reader come to understand written forms and patterns of language that differ from those he has heard? In general, in almost exactly the same way he has learned to understand greater complexity in oral language--through continuous exposure. Just as the language learner learns to understand greater complexity in oral language through frequent exposure to more complex oral language, so, too, does he learn to understand more complex written language through continuous exposure to more complex written language. New meanings are gradually incorporated through frequent experiences reading them; in other words, the beginning reader uses the same processes for absorbing the lexical richness and density of written language that he uses for absorbing or internalizing more complex oral language.

How more precisely does the developing reader go beyond the limits of the level of his comprehension of spoken language? This is not spelled out by Vygotsky or Luria. One may hypothesize that the development of the reader's ability to understand as "direct symbolism" written forms of language that are familiar to him may gradually enable him to understand as direct symbolism some written forms of language that are unfamiliar to him. These newly acquired semantic/syntactic forms and structures then provide the context for the developing

reader to understand other written forms of language that are also unfamiliar to him. In this way, written forms of language that differ from forms in the reader's spoken language system function as new resources that serve to accelerate growth in understanding written language beyond the level of listening comprehension. It is in this way that literacy nourishes itself. Eventually, mature readers can absorb language visually that is far richer and denser than spoken language. (Indeed, it is difficult to listen to language that is as dense and as rich as their mature language we can read.)

Now let us turn to the development of writing. As Figure 1 indicates, the beginning writer may encode spoken language directly or he may encode from inner speech, which in the pre-school years is the internalization of external speech. In either case, the only independent source from which the beginning writer derives meaning is the spoken language. Written language that is of greater richness and complexity than the oral language he can comprehend cannot influence his writing because his experience with spoken language determines what he can understand, and hence, absorb from written texts. So long as what the beginning writer reads must be translated into meaningful sounds for comprehension to occur, his writing cannot be richer or more complex than the language he has heard. The language of beginning writing will therefore be very much like speech written down.

How is the language of the beginning writer transformed into the language of more mature writing? Here one may hypothesize that the development of the ability to understand written language directly, together with frequent reading experiences at progressively more difficult levels, enables the developing writer to internalize written forms of language that differ in quality and density from the language he experiences aurally and, eventually, to use or reproduce them in his writing. With sufficient experience and instruction in reading and writ-

ing, the mature writer can produce language that is far richer than the language he speaks. (Indeed, we cannot easily produce language orally that is as dense and as rich as the language we can write.) By positing a source of influence on meaning that is not gated by the writer's level of listening comprehension, the model in Figure 2 accounts for the writer's ability to use or produce language that is richer and denser than his spoken language.

As suggested by Luria, inner speech develops even more after the onset of literacy training. Thus, Figure 2 also shows the direct influence of writing upon inner speech. Luria writes:

Because it delays the direct appearance of speech connections, inhibits them, and increases requirements for the preliminary, internal preparation for the speech act, written speech produces a rich development of inner speech which could not take place in the earliest phases of development (p.143).

Because meaning and thought are related but not identical in this model (see Sokolov, Bruner et al., pp. 43-44), the direct influence of writing upon inner speech and inner listening means that meaning and thought are also enhanced by writing.

Finally, Figure 2 shows that what one has written becomes in its own right a text to be read and "listened to" directly. Critical reading of one's own text during the revising process may become at least as great a stimulus for mental activity and intellectual development as the reading of others' texts. Ong asserts that written words make possible "psychological operations so complex as to defy total description" ("Beyond," p. 8).

It is important to note that in this model, speech itself is affected by written language development. However, it is possible that the longer established habits of speech, the speed with which it must be produced, and its lack of perman-

ence probably keep speech less complex than writing at all levels of development. The relative slowness of writing and the objectified nature of written language enable the writer to produce or work out forms of written language that the nature of spoken language precludes.

What are the pedagogical implications of this model? If the significant characteristics of mature written language are not present in spoken language and are therefore not a part of the language learner's natural language environment, then the density and richness of mature written language cannot be absorbed through oral language experience and practice. Teachers will need to provide students with regular exposure to increasing levels of textual density to help them absorb the lexical richness and density of written language (see Stotsky, forthcoming, for a discussion of this issue). They will also have to provide them with regular practice in writing about their own ideas and what they are learning about the world around them to help them use this language and develop mastery of its resources. Note that this model does not suggest that students should not engage in oral language activities; such activities are valuable for their own sake. What the model does imply is that oral language experiences are not a substitute for reading and writing experiences.

The model of written language development that I offer here accounts for the knowledge the mature reader/writer has of the language he understands and uses. The model is based on the assumption that the structure and substance of written language is qualitatively different in nature from the structure and substance of spoken language. Although experience with spoken language determines meaning in beginning reading and writing, the model indicates that the relationship may be very different at higher levels of literacy development; not only may reading and writing influence each other, but they may also influence meaning in oral language as well. In effect, the model postulates a reciprocal relationship,

even a multidirectional one, among the four language processes: oral language may influence written language, written language may influence oral language, and reading and writing may each enhance the other directly in different but equally profound ways. Because the model not only supports the goals and activities of teachers of academic writing but is itself supported by empirical evidence (e.g., see the review of the literature by Stotsky, 1982), it may be useful as a theoretical framework for both pedagogy and research. Moreover, because this model suggests how literacy at its higher levels provides readers and writers with a wealth of resources to think with and about, it can help us to explore how the mind develops new meanings and creates ideas that previously did not exist.

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