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Plotting a new course — Language Studies in Teacher Training

GRAHAM WALKER

To observe
You must learn to compare,
To be able to compare
You must have observed already,
From observation comes knowledge
But knowledge is needed to observe.

BRECHT

This conundrum revolves about observation, its necessity, its prerequisites, its results. So does this course.[1] But first, why did the English department at JCE decide to introduce a pilot course in language studies (with the possibility of its becoming permanent) when its head, Michael Gardiner, in an address to the Transvaal Association of Teachers of English in 1976[2], said:

> "The intention of the following remarks is to state in brief why the English academic courses at the Johannesburg College of Education have an almost exclusive literary bias ... The courses are quite correctly styled 'English Academic' by the Transvaal Education Department and the concern is primarily, essentially and deliberately with the education and training of students in the reading and discussion of literature"?

The Bullock Committee concluded its report[3] on the teaching of reading and uses of English with 333 Conclusions and Recommendations, and reluctantly singled out 17 Principal Recommendations. One of them, number 15, reads:

> "A substantial course on language in education (including reading) should be part of every primary and secondary school teacher's initial training, whatever the teacher's subject or the age of the children with whom he or she will be working."

This conclusion is derived from, among others, the Committee's specific recommendation that

> "as part of their professional knowledge teachers should have an explicit understanding of the processes at work in the classroom discourse, the ability to appraise the pupils' spoken language, and the means of extending it."
>
> (Paragraphs 10.2 — 10.7)

In Chapter 11 this is extended to the pupils' written language. And in the opinion of the Committee, this basic course should occupy at least 100 hours and preferably 150.

But this is not it. The impulse for the course arose originally from the dissatisfaction with a purely literary training felt by a number of lecturers in the English department, a dissatisfaction that resulted in their studying applied linguistics at British universities. The Bullock Report, then, placed an imprimatur on their dissatisfaction.

Then in the course of their studies came a growing conviction that a knowledge of and sensitivity to how language operates would help teachers to harmonize the way language it taught with the way it is naturally learnt. Their colleagues came to share this conviction or at least to consider it worthy of trial in a pilot course.

At this point, I must make absolutely clear the sense in which I use the word "language". In this context there are three. First there is language meaning "tongue" — any tongue, from Arabic to Zulu. Then there is language meaning the curriculum division: the subject English has traditionally (and unfortunately) been divided into the three parts of what has been called the Tripod Curriculum: Composition, Literature and *Language*. Or, according to a narrower interpretation of this sense, "language" could mean "grammar".

Finally there is language meaning the uniquely human capacity to use a symbol system — for a number of purposes, among them communication. It is in this last ,broad sense that I shall use the term throughout.

Having dealt with one possible misconception, let me deal with three misconceptions about the course that are already current. These are, first, that it is concerned to improve the students' own language skills, spoken and written. The second, allied to the first, is that it is a remedial course for students who are particularly weak linguistically. And the third is that it is a specifically methodological course. None is correct.

The overall aim of the course is "to increase the students' awareness of the part played by language in education." This aim is further divided into four specific aims:

1. To develop a thorough-going understanding of the nature and functions of language;
2. To provide a theoretical basis for an understanding of the relationship of language and learning;
3. To explore the nature of the relationship of language and learning in various contexts (the classroom, the school, society);
4. To provide an opportunity to assess the implications of various types of language usage.

It can therefore be seen that there is no specific focus on the students' language skills. This is not true of Douglas Young's proposed language studies course.[4] His proposed course is largely concerned with the students' language skills:

> "Language Studies ... in teacher training courses should, I think, have as its aim the teaching of the concepts of language variety/style and the communicative use of language to meet the communication needs of society.
>
> The teaching of grammar and structure should not be prescriptive, not an end in itself, but a disciplined basis for the pupil to build upon in his writing for different audiences and in different registers. Language Studies should concentrate on all four language learning skills — listening, speaking, reading and writing."

There is one sense, however, in which the JCE course can be said to be concerned with skills — one of the *methods* of the course is to use class and small-group discussion as follow-up to general lectures, and undoubtedly this has a salutary effect on spoken language skills. Those teaching the course believe, though, that a course which will seek to improve students' language skills is necessary, and welcome the attention being given the matter by the Curriculum Development Committee.

In setting straight the second misconception, it must be said that the two groups of roughly 25 students each were selected purely at random from the 18 second-year groups. In fact, if anything they are slightly above average in ability.

The course occupies half the contact hours in the second-year English course, and is absolutely comparable in academic rigour with the purely literary course.

While the course has profound methodological implications, they are not explicitly pointed. This is because there is a strict organizational distinction at this level between the English department which teaches the academic course and the Senior and Junior Primary departments which teach English method. In my opinion, the dichotomy between method and academic study is a false one: academic study should guide practice and practice should inform academic study. Organizational structures should reflect this.

How does the content of the course embody the aim of "increasing the students' awareness of the part played by language in education"?

During the course students are required to assess the implications for the teaching of English of advances being made in linguistics, the social sciences, psychology and sociology, and their hybrid offspring, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. It is essentially a course in applied linguistics. The work of theorists such as J R Firth, Chomsky, M A K Halliday, Suzanne Langer, Piaget, George Kelly, Jerome Bruner, D W Harding, Vygotsky, Luria, Bellugi and Brown, Basil Bernstein, Harold and Connie Rosen, Berger and Luckmann, William Labov, Sapir and Whorf, James Moffett, James Britton and Douglas Barnes, among others, is examined, assessed and applied.

To put more flesh on these bones, here is the language studies section of the second-year work programme. Beneath the headings will be a brief survey of the issues raised in that section (I shall not indicate how the various topics are divided according to 7-day cycles):

1. LANGUAGE, AN INTRODUCTION

   a. THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

      The questions 'what is language?' and 'how did language originate?' were discussed in this introductory section.

   b. THE FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE

      A number of theoretical models of the functions of language were presented and evaluated, and their educational significance discussed.

   c. OUR PARTICULAR LANGUAGE

      i. *Accent and dialect*

         Professor Lanham of the University of the Witwatersrand gave a lecture on South African English, illustrated with tape recordings. His premise was "We all extract information from the way people speak".

      ii. *Standard and other varieties*

         The notion of correctness in language was discussed, as were the nature of language varieties, and language as a symbol of social values.

2. LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

   This topic occupied a number of sessions, and the interrelationship of language and thought was explored. The research and theories of Sapir and Whorf (linguistic determinism), Luria and Yudovich, Bernstein, Bruner, Piaget, Gusdorf and Kelly were examined.

3. LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

   a. LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

      The process of early language acquisition was described, its complexity was evaluated, and means of expediting it were discussed.

   b. LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

      James Moffett's theories on teaching the universe of discourse were presented as one model of how children's language might further be developed.

   c. LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

      i. *Classroom interaction*

         One model of the dynamics of classroom interaction was presented and applied.

      ii. *The teacher's language behaviour*

         How the teacher's language behaviour expedites or hinders learning was investigated.

   At the time of writing this was the point reached in the course. The topics yet to be covered are:

      iii. The heuristic function of language

      iv. The language of textbooks.

   d. LANGUAGE IN THE SCHOOL

      i. The development of writing abilities.

      ii. Language across and between the curriculum.

   e. LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

      i. Theories of language deprivation.

      ii. Language in a multi-lingual and multicultural society.

      iii. The political rôle of language.

The lecturing duties (as far as general lectures to the combined group are concerned) are divided equally between the two lecturers in charge of the course, the writer and Bill Holderness. The follow-up sessions are held by each with his own group of students.

Assessment of the course is by assignments and examinations. Here are the questions set for the May examination:

1. Discuss the notion of "correctness" in language. Among others, you should discuss the following topics:

   Is there such a thing as correct English?

   What reasons are commonly advanced for a usage being "incorrect"?

   What is standard English?

   What is the relationship between standard and other language varieties? (50)

2. "Language (both spoken and written) unifies and divides. It symbolises a common bond. It ties people together and it marks them off as distinct from others. At all levels and in all communities, language is a symbol of group and individual identity."

   Explore, giving examples, the various issues raised in and by the above quotation. (50)

3. Write an essay in which you explain and justify (with examples) your opinion/conclusions about the relationship between language and thought. (50)

4. A transcript of a discussion is reproduced below. The speakers are three 13 year old girls in an English comprehensive school. The teacher has read to the class a passage about the spread of typhoid in polluted drinking water in 1866. He then suggested some lines of action which could have been taken to stop the spread of the disease. The pupils were then left to consider, in groups, how the people involved would have reacted to the suggested lines of action.

   (The transcript is reproduced)

   Write an essay in which you demonstrate how the children are *using language to organise their thoughts.*

   Support your observations by close reference to the text.

   EXAMPLE

   In Beverley's long speech (no. 2) we can follow her as she sorts out for herself why the sewage system should be built separately from the stream. She must partly "know" this already in an unformed, intuitive way. The need to put this to someone else compels her to formulate it clearly.[5] (50)

I began this article with a conundrum of Brecht's about observation. This brief survey of the content of the course has shown how students have been introduced to the results of painstaking observation and research. They will be required to continue this process of observation and research as they do an assignment during the period of teaching experience. We hope the course has given them the tools with which to do it and the sensitivity to know where to look.

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5. Open University 1973, *Language in the Classroom,* Open University Press.

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