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Ashworth, Colleen

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Johannesburg College of Education
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Colleen Ashworth

LANGUAGE AND LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

A justification and an explanation

"The Purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world view, and mental habits proper to the devotees of Insoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all, and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought ... should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words."[1]

So says George Orwell in his book 1984, along with "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller."[2]

While the exact relationship between language and thought is complicated and not well understood, (for centuries there has been this controversy: Does thought depend on language, or vice versa?) I could support the theory that "higher levels" of abstract thought are supported by

language, and that our most significant communication, learning and interaction could not be achieved without it. Thus I think that it is fair to conclude (not least of all from Orwell's passages), that language has the following purposes:

i) It facilitates learning by enabling any form of knowledge to be classified, and provides the means for this classified information to be transmitted.

ii) It enables experiences to be interpreted, and inter-related.

iii) Language allows thinking and reasoning - one can plan, predict and imagine. Reasoning can solve problems, analyse, explore alternatives, and make possible inventions of any kind.

iv) Behaviour can be controlled by language - "actions are thoughts expressed aloud", and if it is indeed true that thought depends on language, then limited language can cause limited thought and consequently limited actions, as Orwell so neatly illustrates.

v) Language also promotes communication, understanding, self expression, ideas, emotions, social values, and nearly all social functioning.

I think that it is evident from the above points that the teacher has a vital role to play in the development and teaching of language skills in response to the very real needs of pupils:

i) The teacher listens, and by doing so, shares time and conveys a social attitude.

ii) By talking, the teacher provides pupils with opportunities to listen, and make possible essential interaction. She also extends and reinforces conventional language patterns.

iii) The teacher provides a stimulating and enriching environment, conducive to language development: she provides, with the help of pupils, and in accordance with their interest, experiences about which to talk, opportunities to do so, and most imporant, people with whom to interact.

iv) The teacher can monitor and aid a child's ability to communicate, think, reason, argue, interact socially, organise and express knowledge and emotions, and in so doing contribute to the overall development of the child.

Clearly these responsibilities do not belong solely to the "English" teacher, but rather to every teacher who uses language as a medium for teaching and learning; and the onus is on each teacher - from one of woodwork through history to maths - to refine and to develop a pupil's proficiency in English as a means of appropriate thought and expression.

Educational policies which focused on languages as the pivotal point of education would do much to enhance the learning potential of all students - it is possible that teachers forget that language is not merely a formal skill that is taught in the English room, but is a vital component of any subject which involves speaking, writing reading and listening; and while language's function of transmitting knowledge is undoubtedly important in a learning process, it's more essential feature is perhaps in that it provides for the formation of concepts which form the basis of knowledge, and it is upon the communication of these concepts that the teaching and learning processes rest. A teacher's success in conveying concepts is largely dependant on the language she uses

to do so, and on the pupils' ability to analyze this language in order to grasp the relevant concept. It is because of this that teachers need to be acutely aware of the language they use in their classrooms, so that the communication of their subject's concepts can be effective - all too often teachers do not realize that they are using terms which are alien to their pupils, and which the pupils cannot translate into their own language; something which is essential if a child is to understand and internalize certain concepts.

This clarification of language in order to grasp and express ideas, knowledge and specific concepts is an important process to bear in mind when teaching. Graham Walker, in his article Language across the Curriculum, says that this has "important implications for subject teaching". He maintains that the learning of a subject involves the mastering of its concepts, and for this to happen, a pupil must learn and use the "particular language of the subject".[4]

Language, and therefore learning, across the curriculum, is an idea that first surfaced in 1962

in the English Department of the London University Institute of Education, and it promotes this idea of "learning the language of a subject" in order that overall learning may be that much more successful. It is not possible then that this "teaching of language" be left to the English teacher alone - a teacher of a particular subject is best able to know what demands her subject makes on the language abilities of her pupils, and therefore best qualified to teach the necessary skills central to their learning, and this is one of the key issues in the language across the curriculum policy.

This language centred learning policy came into its own with the publication of the Bullock Report (A Language for Life) in 1975, and the implications of this policy have been widespread: The Transvaal Education Department incorporated this idea into its policies in 1978, with a great emphasis being laid on the integration of language and subjects across the curriculum, with all teachers participating actively in this policy. The emphasis is also on flexibility and on considering the needs of the pupils.

The Bullock report had, as a recommendation for successful language development, the suggestion that all teachers should, in the initial stages of their training, be exposed to a thorough course in language and education, and this is an idea that I would definitely support - if teachers across the spectrum of education are to have an increased awareness of the importance of language, as well as a working knowledge of how to enrich and broaden the language skills of their pupils. Although this is clearly an issue that concerns all teachers, primary and high school, I think that it is perhaps in the high schools that more emphasis needs to be placed. Michael Rice, in his article Context, Language and Cognition maintains that teachers in primary schools have a larger success in dealing with this issue of language being central to learning because language issues are relatively clear in the new language experiences with the children are involved, and I think this may also be due to the fact that in the junior classes teachers are more or less responsible for the initial language development of their pupils, and they are involved in most language experiences the children have

in the classroom. This is not so in the high school, where pupils experience a timetabled separation of subjects, with no "language link" between them. Often "language" is merely a component of "English" which subjects them to rather boring and somewhat fragmented study of formal and conventional grammar techniques. Dr. Rice says that "by the time the pupil gets to the end of his school career there is an almost total separation in his mind and the minds of his teachers of the relationship between language and learning."[5] I think too, that high school teachers tend to take for granted the role played by junior school teachers, assuming that they have dealt with the language development of pupils, not realizing that this development is an ongoing process, and that there are continual language demands made on pupils, and that these demands are greater when they are dealing with subjects that are not familiar to them. Often pupils do not know what is expected of them by teachers of different subjects, and are not aware that the written and spoken language they use must be appropriate to the subject for which it is used.

Michael Stubbs, in his book Language, Schools and Classrooms gives the followng example of appropriate classroom language:

> "Few things can be more beautiful than to watch crystals grow before your eyes in various shapes and hues. Yesterday, my friend and I dropped some warm, strong copper sulphate solution into a microscope slide, and watched with delight as the liquid cooled and the tiny crystals took shape."

Clearly this type of language would be out of place in the science room, with the following being much more acceptable:

> "Two or three drops of warm, concentrated copper sulphate solution were placed on a microscope slide. As the solution cooled, crystals were deposited. Solutions were selected so that varieties of crystal forms and colours were investigated."

While this example may seem a little obvious, in many instances the line between appropriate and inappropriate language is thin. Contrary to the opinion of many teachers, pupils do not automatically acquire the skills of language and

communication. Some pupils acquire these skills more readily than others, but more often than not they have to be taught and developed, and if a policy of teaching language across the wide curriculum of education - a language that is active and real and needed - helps to achieve the successful language and personal development of pupils, then the worth of such a policy is clearly evident, and education could only be improved by it.

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1) Douglas Barnes, Language in the Classroom Open University Press, 1973.

2) Stubbs, Michael, Language, Schools and Classrooms, Methuen and Co. 1976

3) Lengwitch, November 1984, March 1985

4) Handouts -
   Walker - Language across the curriculum
   Rice - Introducing a language and learning, project

5) Orwell, 1984 , Penguin Books, 1983

NOTES:

1) Orwell, George, As above Page 257.
2) Orwell, George, " " Page 49
3) Number 4 above, Walker, Page 73
4) As Above
5) LENGWITCH, November 1984, pages 4-5