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Context, language and cognition

Rice, Michael;

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ARTICLES

Michael Rice

CONTEXT, LANGUAGE AND COGNITION

As far back as 1978, that seldom read but often quoted and much maligned document, (the TED English syllabus for primary schools) contained a policy statement on the attitudes to language development it wishes to encourage in teachers:

> All language teaching should be flexible and designed to meet the needs of the pupils.(1.2.c)

In other words,an invitation is extended to teachers to adopt an approach most suited to the needs of their pupils.This invitation is a tacit acknowledgement that only the teacher who knows the pupils and their particular needs is in a position to determine the strategies best suited to coping with those needs. Thus, the syllabus does not prescribe to the teacher what must be taught or how it must be taught.The syllabus further states:

> Integration with other subjects is essential so that the language growth of the child is fostered across the curriculum and is the concern of all teachers.(1.2.i)

And more specifically, for our purposes, in a paragraph entitled 'Language Across the Curriculum' the point is made that the development of language skills is not the

sole perogative of the English teacher;

> but is the collective responsibility of all teachers teaching subjects through the medium of the language. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of the school to formulate a language policy that will ensure that every teacher plays an active role in language teaching across the curriculum. (1.7)

It has long been recognized by teachers and education theorists that one of the most profound and intractable problems in education is that of helping pupils overcome the cognitive/language demands made on them by the subjects they are studying. For all too long teachers across the curriculum have deplored falling standards'.Pupils (and students in higher education), we are told, can no longer write coherently, construct a sentence or paragraph, spell, read intelligently, take notes, interpret diagrams, express themselves orally, nor do they show much interest in reading. And certainly, there is a weight of evidence to support this view. After the initial grounding provided in the junior primary phase something seems to go wrong, and it gets worse with the passage of time. Traditionally the blame was laid at the door of the English Department which it was felt should give up all its new-fangled ideas and methods and get back to basics. Basics were generally understood to include parsing,

clausal analysis and other forms of traditional grammar. All this is believed despite the wealth of evidence which clearly and repeatedly shows that there is no causal relationship between learning traditional grammar and improving language skills. This belief has not died out yet. Periodically, crusty retired inspectors of education, especially those with a background in classics, dash off letters to the press extolling the virtues of the unsplit infinitive and the so-called 'rules' of punctuation. While there is a case to be made for teaching what has been described as the 'nuts and bolts' of language, what traditionalists fail to acknowledge is that the study of language has come a long way in the past thirty years and what they take for the 'rules of grammar' are, in the main, no more than arbitrary conventions. But more important, what is ignored is the real issue which underlies the 'grammar debate' , and that is the relationship between cognition and language.Understanding and language are inseparable from each other.

Once it is recognized that each subject in the curriculum makes its own cognitive demands on learners then it is a short step to acknowledging that the discourse (i.e.the register) associated with those subjects is rightly and properly the concern of those who are teaching the subjects. This probably accounts for the large measure of success teachers in the junior primary phases have in our schools. They know they cannot afford to ignore the language issues implicit in each new learning experience.It is later in the

school when the specious separation of subjects from language takes place on the timetable that the rot begins to set in.By the time the pupil gets toward 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. History, geography, science and maths teachers all seem to assume that if the pupil has mastered the mechanics of reading (i.e. is able to decode) that is all there is to reading. They should try reading a biology text-book the way they would a novel.

In moments of neo-Kantian fantasy I sometimes believe that the only way out of this impasse is to remove English from the time-table completely and eliminate the English exam. The only concession that should be made is a course involving ten times the amount of literature at present in the syllabus called 'Literary Studies'.All teachers would have to shoulder the responsibility of doing something about the language issues associated with their subjects. But enough of fantasy.

One of the major points to emerge from the 1983 LLAC conference held at JCE is that pupils and students arrive at school or College from a highly contextualized environment in which they can communicate and interact with a certain degree of proficiency. (By 'contextualized' I mean the pupils have the appropriate understanding and language skills that enable them to interact and communicate more or less efficientlly at home or with their peer group) However, it

is obvious that the language demands made upon pupils at school and later upon students at College are vastly different from those made at home.Different conventions have to be learnt.

What I have to say about students at tertiary level applies in many respects to pupils throughout their school careers. When students arrive at College they find themselves in an unfamiliar 'context or situation' in which they do not have the background knowledge or skills necessary to understand the new information they receive. Nor do they have the means to internalize, assimilate and re-express it. In other words, they have the language that has served them well enough in the highly contextualized environments of their homes and even, but to a much lesser extent, at high school, but find that kind of language inappropriate to the demands made upon them in their lectures and researches in the library. In some cases the appropriate language is non-existant. Many students are unaware that they do not have the language necessary for College because they have passed matric. That is, they do not know that they do not know.

The vast majority of students/pupils founder because they are severely handicapped in their ability to understand the new cognitive schemas they are introduced to.That is, they do not have the intellectual frames of reference or the language procedures (the two are inseparable) that will make new information accessible to them or enable them to communicate (particularly in writing) what

they have learnt.

As far as reading and writing skills are concerned students/pupils do not know what is expected of them by the various subject departments.When last did you hear of, for example, a history or biology teacher devoting part of his time to teaching the particular reading and writing skills necessary for success in his subject ? As a consequence very often students/pupils are unable to discriminate between what is and what is not appropriate language behaviour in an academic environment. The mastery of the appropriate language is central to the mastery of new information (as anyone who has read an insurance proposal for the first time knows). Few teachers beyond the junior primary phase make provision in their teaching programmes to deal with the kind of language they appear to assume their pupils have. This is lamentably so, particularly from high school onwards, and can to a large extent account for the high failure rate in our universities. There is no escaping the fact that the mastery of the appropriate language is central to the mastery of new information. Every teacher (at school or tertiary level) has got to be prepared to assume responsibility for making the development of language/cognitive skills appropriate to his subject part of his normal teaching strategy. For, until teachers are prepared to make explicit by example and analysis what the reading and writing demands of their subjects are and the standards which must be met, and are prepared actively to develop the cognitive and language skills

their students/pupils need, we are going to continue being confronted with students/pupils who are incapable of expressing themselves coherently because they have the most superficial understanding of the new information they receive.

Muddled language is a reflection if muddled thinking. It follows then, that no teachers can afford to ignore the language that confronts them in assignments, essays and examination papers, in reading materials or that manifests itself in the classroom. Every teacher has an obligation to do as much as possible in the interests of his/her subject to develop the language which is inseparable from the so-called 'content'. All teachers are language teachers and all lessons are language lessons.