

Language and the Language Teacher; A Greed

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Like a “Rapid Results College”, the language teacher must produce quick results. His main preoccupation

therefore tends to be with ways and means, tactics and strategies. Whether or not directly or indirectly, the kind

of professional training undergone is responsible for, perhaps, over-exaggerating the importance of methodology it would be interesting to know. In any case this article is motivated by the conviction that it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of every language teacher's concern with something else – something approaching “a philosophy of language”. For his own self-respect, if no more, he ought constantly to remind himself of the nature of what he teaches. Moreover, his “philosophy of language”, defined or undefined, will be a crucial qualitative if unquantifiable factor determining the teacher-language-pupil relationship. In one way or another the teacher's attitude to language, and to the language he teaches, will “show”, his students will “catch” it (or the lack of it), and their interest will be affected for good or ill. “Philosophy” should also come before methodology because without it there is no fundamentally valid way of evaluating the worth of any method. Of course there is always the test of results produced. But what results count as “good”? The highest pass-percentage? The ability to speak or write with some show of grammatical correctness? to write “beautiful” English? or what? Answers to these and other questions will depend on, and will certainly reflect, one's whole outlook on language.

The rest of this article is a series of statements on some aspects of language and its teaching for the reader to consider incorporating or rejecting as part of his linguistic creed. The practical bearing of some of them on the teaching-and-learning situation is left for the reader to work out for himself.

- 1.0. One may be born with a silver spoon in the mouth but not a silver tongue. The pentecostal gift of tongues is a divine miracle; in the sense that breathing is what one does naturally from birth, language is *not* a natural phenomenon.
- 1.1. That an English child is born with an English faculty to speak English is a myth. So, too, is any notion that a Malaysian child hasn't got it in him to speak and write English well.
- 1.2. Other things being equal, in the acquisition of language all pupils are equal: no one is better off in respect of a natural linguistic aptitude; no pupil should be given up in despair because of “no linguistic aptitude” alone, and no pupil should be allowed to resign himself to the idea that God has left him out in the dispensation of “the gift of the gab”.
- 2.0. Language is an integrated hierarchy of phonological, grammatical and syntactic structures.

- 2.1. In that sense it is not an unaccountable mystery whose secrets only the intuitively gifted can penetrate into. The parts and patterns of a linguistic system which can be laid bare in analysis and description can be taught and learnt.
- 2.2. Learning a language is initially nothing more than achieving a reasonable grasp of basic structures. Such achievement, however, can't be equated with anything like a real mastery of the language. Methods and contents of teaching clearly depend on the target set: mechanical, correct competence or something beyond that. For hard-working and keen pupils the lower targets would be a criminal and crippling limitation; for all there is no harm, and there may be much good, in being gradually introduced to the experience of the look, sound and shape of as wide a variety as possible of language well-used.
- 2.3. Competence in basic structures is competence in the handling of language as a *tool*. The use of language as a tool, and no more, is highly amenable to being taught through formal instructions and methods.
- 3.0. Language can be *treated as*, but is not only, a tool. The use of language in a manner that goes beyond the merely utilitarian is not as easily teachable, in terms of formal instructions and methods, as its use as a tool; but not to attempt putting students on the way to developing some ability to express in language qualities of personality, sensibility or imagination is a wasteful rejection of language as one of the most important agents in the education of the individual.
- 3.1. The Whorfian hypothesis, to put it with highlighted brevity, states that one's thinking and feeling – one's “world-picture”, in fact – are appreciably conditioned and shaped by the language one uses. Any such hypothesis implicitly questions – any extreme version of it explicitly denies – the view of language as a *passive* tool. Command of a language therefore means command of a whole complex of modes and structures of thinking and feeling.
- 3.2. Language is an intellectual and emotional discipline. The constant acts of choice, judgement and discrimination that any serious use of language invariably entails extend and sharpen thinking and feeling.
- 3.3. Pope's statement that when language is supremely used it expresses “What once was thought but ne'er s

well expressed” can be taken as springing from a mechanistic view of language: an idea exists in one’s head, *then* one clothes it in appropriate language. Every schoolboy holds this view: the typical excuse for a poor essay is that he has ideas but not the requisite command of the language.

- 3.4. McLuhan’s happy hippie-style slogan “The medium is the message” gives an extreme edge to the organic view of language: form and content don’t exist in dualistic separation; there is no real substance to any idea, thought or feeling in one’s head or anywhere else *until* the act of verbal realization is complete. Verbalization, that is, is not “expression” in so far as that means putting in words what somehow one already knows; it is rather the act of *discovering* what it is that one thinks one knows.
- 3.5. Neither Pope’s nor McLuhan’s is completely right; the truth as usual lies somewhere between. But if one has to choose it is better to go along with the organic view even in its extreme form, because it assigns profound significance to language as the “soul” of thought, than to espouse the mechanistic view which trivializes language, reducing it to the “garment” of thought.
- 4.0. Style in a sense is the variation and permutation of the basic structures and patterns of a language. Regarded as such it is not an impenetrable mystery; and although it is not as easily teachable as grammar and syntax, once grammatical elements and syntactic structures have been established, an awareness of style can be aroused.
- 4.1. Authentic style is organic: it is functionally significant vis-a-vis what is expressed. Demonstrating this frequently and clearly in class is one very good way not just of teaching style but of developing a deep interest in language.
- 4.2. Reading actively is not just reading critically with reference to “content”. Comprehension exercises spend too much time encouraging students to read for the abstracted gist of a passage, too little provoking response to how language actually works to produce the results it does. Some element of response there must be to the detailed patterning of a piece of language for reading to be experiential, “engaged”. And only such reading will help the student himself to write well.
- 4.3. Rhetoric is the descriptive codification of stylistic events and features of language use. Rhetorical figures of speech are not (despite the jargon: “zeugma”, “parounomasia”, “asyndeton”, etc.) an affair of sterile artifice invented by rhetoricians; the rhetoricians found then in language actually used.
- 4.3. Though often, when abused, no more than decorative embellishers, figures of speech are equally often, when sensitively used, verbal organizations realizing emotive, dramatic and other effects. Perhaps experimenting with adaptations of classical-Renaissance rhetoric can help in developing an awareness of style.
- 5.0. Trafficking in language is or should be an experience no less real than dealing with non-linguistic events. If in any and every way possible students can be made to realise this, teachers can cease being drill-masters to become guides taking part in the world of linguistic experience.