

THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE*

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1. PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

It has been said that 'educational failure is language failure'. This is probably an over-generalisation, since it is clear that there are many *other* factors which could cause educational failure, and it is equally clear that language failure does not *necessarily* result in lack of academic success. However, it is no doubt true that the schoolchild who does not attain a certain level and type of language competence will be handicapped as regards academic performance.

The underlying reason for this is the fact that our educational system is heavily reliant on language - and especially the *written* language - as a medium of learning as opposed to the 'direct learning' experiences advocated by certain educationists today such as Ivan Illich in America and John Holt in Britain. Language is the basis both of learning and of communicating what has been learnt. From the moment the child steps into his first period class in the morning till he leaves the last five hours later, the child is involved in what is primarily a *verbal* experience.

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Not only does the child need to acquire a particular *level* of competence but he also needs to develop a certain *type* of competence - one which will enable him to cope with the type of language used and/or demanded by textbook authors, teachers and examiners. The variety of language involved here is both conventional and academic/linguistic in origin. As regards the former, textbooks tend to be written and examinations set in a style which has, over the years, tacitly come to be accepted as the norm. Pupils are, furthermore, expected to write their answers in a similar style - although a range of tolerance does seem to be permitted. As regards the academic/linguistic causes of the type of language we see in schools, we can say that academic study demands a different type of language. Sager et al (1980) distinguish between what they call 'general' and 'special' languages. 'Special' language reflects a specialised type of knowledge which is qualitatively different from what might be called 'general' knowledge. The underlying difference is between what Johnson-Laird and Wason (1977) call the 'intuitive and implicit categories of daily life' and the 'more self-conscious and cold-blooded categories of an explicit classification system such as one finds in a science' (p 169).

It is essential, then, that the child learn to cope with the demands of the language of education, which is an amalgam of what has conventionally come to be regarded as the 'right' kind of language for teaching, learning and examining and the specialised or technical language of academic discourse. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, within the broad category we have designated 'special language', there are a *number* of clearly differentiated varieties or 'special *languages*' to which the child needs to learn to adjust. Each of these special languages reflects what Flood (1957:6) calls 'specialised subject matter' or what Sager et al (1980:70) refer to as 'a bounded subsystem of the knowledge structure'. The curriculum in our schools is such that each child must usually take at least six subjects, which can vary widely in range. Thus one child, for example, might take some languages, one or more of the humanities, a science, Mathematics and a practical subject such as Woodwork. The inter-disciplinary approach to subjects which has been propagated and practised in Britain in certain areas for a number of years has not found favour in South Africa.

The typical school timetable is such that it divides the school-day into about nine periods of approximately 35 minutes. Subjects are arranged in a haphazard order to suit staffing allocations and other practical considerations rather than to ensure any kind of continuity for the child. The pupil may therefore move, for example, from English to Science to History,

then back to English, on to Woodwork and finally to Afrikaans, his day being interspersed with instruction in a number of 'non-examination' subjects. While this certainly helps to counteract boredom, it also places great strain on the child who has continually to adapt to the very different demands of each subject, and in particular the terminological demands.

The child, then, needs to be able to cope with the varied demands of the different special languages in addition to the generally accepted 'language of education'. The fact that both of these are highly complex in nature helps to explain why the truism that 'educational failure is language failure' can claim a high degree of validity.

2. THE SOLUTIONS

The difficulties the child faces as a result of the linguistic demands of education in general have been highlighted in recent years. The vital role of language in learning has been explored in various quarters. Slogans such as 'Every teacher is a teacher of English' and catch-phrases such as 'language across the curriculum' have become the order of the day. The need for every teacher to be aware of the linguistic problems that pupils experience in each subject is one of the recommendations of the much-quoted *Bullock Report* of 1975, and has been popularised in publications of writers such as Creber (*Lost for Words*), John Holt (*How Children Fail*), James Britton, Douglas Barnes and others. In South Africa a nascent awareness of these problems has manifested itself in the on-going project on language across the curriculum at the Johannesburg College of Education; in the inclusion of a small section on the language of Science in the programme of the Conference of Science Teachers held in Cape Town in 1981; in the production of an M.Ed. thesis on the readability of Science textbooks at UCT in 1981; and in the scattered passing references to 'language across the curriculum' in the draft of the new syllabuses for English in schools.

Consensus on what should be done to overcome these problems has not, however, been reached. Two main approaches have been advocated. The answer can *either* be to help the child to cope with the specialised demands of the language of education *or* to change the language of education itself to suit the child. The architects of the British Schools Council projects on the role of language in learning have, in the past decade or so, been propagating the second view through their reports and publications - and, indeed, through their involvement in *Bullock Report* itself. They argue that there should be more *verbal* interaction in the classroom and that written work should be *informal* and

should allow for a mixture of a personal, creative style with a formal, objective style - at any rate, in the early years of the high school. The 'audience' for such writing should shift from the teacher as examiner to the child himself or the teacher as 'facilitator'.

It is clear that this viewpoint, despite its obvious merits, is, in the final analysis, far too simplistic. It is naive to suggest that the traditional language of education and the technical languages attached to different subjects are merely unnecessary adornments which complicate matters and can simply be swept away. On the contrary, much of what is typical of the language of education is a reflection of the nature of the subjects or the educational process itself. If the language of education is complex, one reason is that the content of education is complex.

It can also be argued that, even if it were possible to reduce the language or learning to a simple, informal level, such a language would not easily find a place in the South African schools. The reason is that the Schools Council approach is based on approach to education which has not found much favour in this country. The Schools Council authors have come out in support of a philosophy of education which calls for greater 'relevance' in education and attacks the presentation of school subjects as separate compartments of knowledge and above all the assumption that 'knowledge' is something to be handed down to the child. Boundaries between disciplines are therefore regarded as irrelevant and artificial, and 'knowledge' becomes child-centered. The need to use and understand the 'special languages' (especially their terminologies) of education is therefore rejected. In South Africa, this so-called 'progressive' approach to education has not had any significant impact. The traditional subject-orientated approach, still hotly defended in Britain by the supporters of Hirst and Peters and the authors of the *Black Papers*, is very much the order of the day. Text-books and teachers as purveyors of knowledge are much in evidence and examinations are couched in a language which is both formal and technical.

For these reasons, then, the Schools Council answer to opt for a more informal type of language which avoids the use of terminology cannot be introduced holus-bolus into our schools. It might be added here that, even if this were feasible, it would still leave us with the problem of what school pupils will have to face in tertiary education without any adequate preparation in their school years. This does not, however, mean that the Schools Council approach should be ignored. It can be argued

quite validly that the language demands made upon pupils are often *too* formal and *too* technical, that a toning down is both possible and desirable. Also that a more conscious effort should be made to ensure that the language demands are graded according to the age and ability of the pupil.

What we need, then, is a compromise between the two solutions. We need to urge educationists to try, as far as possible, to modify the language they use and the language they demand to suit the child. At the same time, ways and means must be sought to guide teachers in how to assist their pupils to cope with the problems arising from the conventional language of education and the terminologies of different subjects. Various publications on the general principles involved here have appeared in recent years. Texts to assist pupils with specific subjects have also been published, the Oxford *English in Focus* and *Reading and Thinking in English* series being significant examples in point. There are, however, a number of limitations in these publications for our purposes. In the first place, they are not geared towards our syllabuses. Secondly, they aim more to teach *English* to foreigners - with special reference to, say, Science - then to guide pupils in the use and understanding of the language of a particular subject such as Science. Thirdly, they focus on the sentence and the text and neglect the vital question of terminology.

There is, therefore, a need in South Africa to devise texts and to provide guidance to teachers and pupils which will make up for the shortcomings of existing texts. This will necessitate further investigation, in particular into the question of the problems of terminology. It was this need which prompted my own research on terminology which formed the basis of my Ph.D. thesis. Beginnings, then, have been made in the field of guidance on the language of education. We now need to make educationists aware of what is available and to extend, through research, publication and propagation, knowledge of how to assist pupils to cope with the demands and problems of the medium they use daily as a means of learning in schools.

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