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The Language of Vocational Students

There has been much scandalized talk in the last year or two about the glaring inadequacies of our young people's English. The inadequacies of young people in one form or other has of course been standard conversational material since talk began, but this last round has gathered weight from those who count on particular uses of English for their particular transactions with young people in college and university, namely English in the written form. There has been a strange tendency to generalise from such particular inadequacies to the hasty assumption of a wholesale decline in mental operations, which it must be admitted are intimately related to effective language use. McIvor inspects this assumption in the cases of four high-school students who had been stigmatised as poor performers in the written code. Her more patient discovery is that these students are in no way deficient in spoken modes of discourse wherever some degree of their "intention" has been enlisted; and the corresponding implication is the not unfamiliar one — nevertheless made much more clear — that a school's concept of language is too often unrealistically narrow in appearance and fails to engage the intention that must be involved wherever language is really put to use.

Teaching English to vocational students can be a challenging and rewarding experience. To meet this challenge effectively, teachers need to understand that their students will display a broad range of abilities and interests in English. Some of these students may well regard themselves as less able in language in school, or they may profess little or no recognition of English as a course of any practical or personal significance. In such situations it is essential that teachers understand the fundamental relationships between language and learning.

I have recently been involved in a study which examined the language use of a selected group of vocational English students. This study grew out of personal interest in teaching vocational students, and also from my study of a recently articulated body of language theory that makes the processes of students' language both accessible and fruitful for investigation. This theory, ar-

ticulated and synthesized by James Britton (1970), presents a developmental view of language — one that is predicated on the interrelatedness of thought, language, and learning. In this context language behaviour is best understood within a framework that accounts for the social and psychological functions of an individual.

Since the study was concerned with vocational students I was led by Britton's theories (particularly as they are influenced by the philosophy of Michael Polanyi and the psychology of George Kelly) to consider intriguing, and admittedly not yet clearly defined, relationships and theories about the development of a concept of self, its relation to language, and the role of education in influencing children's concepts of themselves as learners or more specifically as language users.

A study of cases

It was the intention of my study to examine the language performance and experiences, and investigate some of the processes of language, of a group of students in a high school vocational English program. Specifically, and in keeping with the growing number of successful studies that have emerged from this language theory perspective, the study used a descriptive, case-study approach, and a qualitative analysis, to explore three principal questions:

1. What is the school history in language of these students?
2. What are the characteristics of the students' present language performance?
3. What are the students' perceptions of themselves as learners in relation to the particular demands and expectations in English of the school?

The study involved four students: two boys and two girls from a grade eleven, non-academic English class. The data were collected from a number of sources over a six-week period, during which time I met the students in four individual sessions and four group sessions. During the first three individual sessions (three for each student) the students were tape-recorded as they composed orally and wrote. The fourth individual session, through an interview format, elicited information about the students' school language experiences. The four group sessions involved the students in discussions of a variety of literary selections of varying degrees of difficulty. Additional data were collected through observation of the students in their regular English classes and through observation and taping of the students in work situations.

The historical perspective

In order to present the students' school language experiences in historical perspective the data were considered from three points of view:

1. The teachers' views of these students as inferred from examination of the students' past records and the teachers' written responses to the students' past writing samples.
2. The students' views as determined primarily by individual interviews.
3. The students' available past writing which — to aid interpretation — was categorized according to Britton's language model.

In respect to the *teachers'* views it was apparent that (with the exception of one student) the students were all regarded as having had some difficulties with language throughout their schooling. However, there were differences in emphasis on the nature of their problems. For example, weakness in language skills and slowness in work habits were the dominant characteristics remarked upon in one students' work. Shyness and lack of effort were those remarked upon in another's. Four characteristics were common to the marking of the students' work:

1. The marking greatly emphasized the mechanical errors of the students' writing.
2. There were very few positive comments; those that there were pertained to content.
3. The relatively few remarks that concerned content were most often broad assessments ("good") and were indiscriminately applied to the whole piece.
4. Virtually no acknowledgement was made of mechanical or syntactic elements in the students' work that were effective.

In respect to the *students'* views three major considerations arose. First, many of the students' comments indicated that they perceive the expectations of English in school in a limited way. This was well illustrated by the comment one student made while discussing one of his writing samples: "I guess I got 'Good' here because I just wrote what she wanted all the way across."

Next, all of the students had definite ideas about what they would like to see in the work in English classes. The criteria common to the group, and expressed in their order of importance, were that the work should be interesting; it should involve group activities; it should have variety; and it should have some value or purpose.

And last, the students' interviews suggested a possible relationship between their views of English and their self-concepts as language users. For example, two of the students expressed a dislike for anything in English that they found difficult or threatening, such as reading aloud or participating in whole-class discussions. Most of the students' specific recollections about school concerned situations they had found threatening (a family move, for instance), and/or involved occasions of failure (a history of extreme difficulty in spelling and its subsequent repercussions).

The students' *past writing* suggested many considerations but space limits discussion to two, for which James Britton's terms were applied. Examination of the way in which all language is used led Britton to perceive a continuum proceeding in two directions from a central, "expressive" function which is the function most immediate and natural to the speaker. As meanings and understanding become clearer, students will move along a language continuum toward language that is "transactional" (explicit and regulatory) or toward language that is "poetic" (implicit and interpretative). To clarify these modes of language, Britton talks about the spectator and participant roles in language. The *spectator* role involves narrative, interpretative, and ultimately poetic functions; the writer speaks as though he or she were watching and commenting on events from the position of an observer. The *participant* role has regulatory, transactional functions, and is primarily used to persuade, inform, or direct; the writer is involved in getting something done.

1. Over 90% of the writing demanded of the students required them to operate in what Britton calls a participant role and a transactional mode. (Their writing samples were not limited to work done for their English classes, but also included work for other subject areas such as social studies and science.)
2. The students all had some writing difficulties; however, these difficulties varied according to the type of writing task in which they were engaged. For the most part, it seemed that writing done in an expressive or exploratory mode showed greater facility. Two brief and contrasting excerpts from one student's writing illustrate this point.

Cultural in General

1. The materials they had were farming, tameing wild animals, and they had lots of food.
2. Yes, there is rituals connected with birth, coming to the adulthood, marriage or death.
3. The leaders where sort of like the people that made the laws.
4. Yes, they do, know who would they get thier good if they diffrent carry on trade.

My life

My life was a pleasure to live,
Until, I thought deep down and on top,
That I wasn't a little girl any more,
I was GROWN UP!

I guess I should start over
Because now I'm the littlest of them all.
Maybe my feelings and thoughts should be mine.
No one seems to understand me.
I will be a quiet and shy person.
I will be quiet to the people I know.
I will have to change not for myself,
But for people who don't understand me.

I will soon learn to worship the other sex.
Although I wish not too, it would be best
I will learn to let people speak first.

I promise to myself that I will change
But it's my LIFE!

The present perspective

Data pertaining to the students' school language were considered qualitatively, drawn from three sources:

1. From the taped talk and writing samples obtained from the students' oral composing sessions. (The students were required to speak their thoughts aloud into a tape recorder as they wrote.)
2. From their talk in group discussion of the various literary selections.
3. From their use of language in a work situation.

Essentially, their oral composing procedures indicated that the students' perceptions of the uses of writing were limited. Their composing was characterized by a) a readiness to begin writing — the students began writing immediately after the writing task was assigned, without any apparent need for or expectation of pre-planning in thought or words; b) a lack of written pre-planning; c) dependence of the form or context used on their interpretation of teacher expectations; d) reliance on the narrative or reporting modes for structure; e) little overt attention to planning, or to mechanics and structure; f) few successful revision tactics; and g) evidence of the exclusion from use in writing of a large background of specific experience.

The most distinctive features of the students' language performance in group discussion raised two main considerations. First, the students demonstrated a considerable facility in talk. They were able to get at, and in many cases explore, the essential meaning in each of the literary selections. There were differences, of course, between the students' levels of performance; these differences, however, related to the differences already perceived in the levels of their writing abilities. Second, the enabling features of group collaboration allowed for a greater extension and depth in their expression of ideas. The flexibility of speech provided opportunities for progressive shaping, organizing, and reformulating of thought; and the reciprocity of dialogue enabled the students to take advantage of immediate feedback to modify or reshape their messages.

Perhaps the most revealing features of the students' language performance appeared in the students' use of language in work situations. ('Work situations' were defined as situations outside the usual, academic, school context. Vocational workshops, beauty parlours, and drama rehearsals in school were

classified as work situations, because they required the students to interact with people such as students, teachers, and the public, in a context outside that of the traditional classroom and teacher-student roles, and they demanded specialized language uses similar to those required out of school in those respective fields.)

The three students involved in this aspect of the study all showed considerable mastery of the subject language of their working environments, which were mechanics, beauty culture, and drama. In these situations the students displayed in their language use a significant awareness of audience needs. Effective language use demands that speakers be able to shape and reshape the language they use to meet the varying levels of understanding and need they encounter with an audience. They must understand the often non-verbal promptings and responses they receive from their audience and make the appropriate choices from a number of options. For example, in the following excerpt, as Bob explains how a battery tester works, he moves from a technical explanation about volts and amperes to a simple account about load, and finally to a concrete example regarding possible complications in winter. He then reverts to technical terms (perhaps revealing how difficult it is to separate language from the concepts it represents), and attempts to illustrate the apparatus through explanations of function and examples of effect.

> This is a battery tester. It will tell you how many amperes your battery, or how many volts your battery's putting out, and then how many amperes. Like, what it does, it loads your battery as if you're starting it — hey? — but it does it at about four times what you're starting at, and sees how long it will put out before it dies. And — like — if it will put out for, you know, so many minutes, well then it's all right. But, if it will only put out for a minute, like that, then you should change it, because you're going to have problems in the winter starting it.
>
> The amps — the amps are how many — how many volts. Well, the amps is how much goes through, and this is how much power it has — hey? This (point ing to dials on machine) is how much push it has and this is how much power it has. Like, with volts — you can have 20,000 volts and it won't hurt you. It will just give you a shock — hey? You can have 20,000. 20,000 volts and no amps will just give you a shock. Twenty thousand volts and say 100 amps will kill you. But, you don't get 100 amps in a battery. You get 100 amps from — ah — you don't get 100 amps in a car. You get 100 amps in, say, if you touch a high-voltage wire outside.

In demonstrating an ability to acccommodate his listener's very minimal grasp of the subject area, Bob shows that he has an awareness, even if unconscious, of the tenor of discourse, that is, of the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the degree of formality of his utterance.

In all of the students' work language there were clear indications that intention was operating. *Intention* in this context is derived from Polanyi's (1962) use of the term, and refers to a student's understanding of the value and functions of

language. If a child lacks the experiential context to do other than mimic the mode of a presentation or assignment, he will not perform with the same language proficiency that he would exhibit if he had the intention of it. To recognize the importance of intention is to emphasize the expressive mode and also the spectator role, which allows the student to discover, reflect on, and present experience.

In our students' case, not only does it seem (to use Polanyi's words) that intention has released 'tacit' powers, it would seem also to have given the students a confidence to tackle further problems. For example, in the beauty parlour setting the comments with which the student greeted her client demonstrated her appreciation of the appropriate register and conventions of language in this situation: "May I take your coat? . . . This way please . . . Would you care for coffee?" At a later point, in response to my comment, "This is all very nice," Rita answered, "Yes, well our instructor is concerned that we all treat our patrons properly." It is very likely that intention gave Rita an impetus for learning this language. Perhaps more precisely one might speculate that intention provided the impetus for building a bridge between personal and impersonal language, while gradual experience in encountering and using the latter enabled her to cross it.

Some tentative conclusions

Although the analysis and findings of this study are themselves of interest, what may be of particular importance is what lies behind these findings. It is with a strong awareness of the limited context from which they are drawn, and with a sense of tentativeness about the immediate general applicability of them, that the following conclusions are offered.

Performance — Competence

It seems that the language ability of each of the four students could not be characterized simply as being consistently within a narrow range of performance. It varied according to mode and situation. Overall, their talk indicated a higher level of language competence than their writing did. Further, the quality of the language performance of the students in this study was seen to vary according to the nature of the language situation in which they found themselves. All of the students, though to a lesser degree in one case, were seen to have some difficulties in writing. However, in some written language modes that Britton has called the expressive, their difficulties were less apparent. With respect to talk, in a group discussion they had many fewer difficulties and exhibited an ability to explore essential meaning in difficult literary selections. In a work situation they had no apparent language difficulties at all. In this environment the students revealed an awareness of both the heuristic and communicative functions of language.

Intention

To questions of whether or not "vocational English students" may exhibit restricted performance in some or many areas of language development, I concluded that for the students in this study this would relate to only a narrow portion of the students' language performance and that it is valid only in a limited sense. The real problem is not the students' inherent language facility, but rather it is the intention and expectation they have regarding school language, and especially regarding writing. To the degree that this exists one might surmise from the data of the study that a pattern something like this may operate (in respect to writing). First, most of the students' writing is transactional, written for teacher as examiner. That is, it serves primarily an evaluative function; hence, students see writing as serving only this end. Second, the way in which teachers generally respond to the writing (granting the difficulties under which they may operate) focuses on surface features and correctness of surface elements. As a result students acquire an even more limited view of the purposes and functions of writing. Because content seems less valued, they themselves become concerned with surface features. However, the very act of placing a primary stress on these features may inhibit their actual competence in them.

Students will not attempt to tackle the difficulties inherent in writing unless they see a value in it. Too often in their writing the students have been left uninformed of the many factors which in any situation outside school would have helped them to plan the form, content, and style of what they wrote. More specifically, they lack different audiences for their writing; thus their concern about grading subordinates any genuine attempt they might make to persuade, amuse, inform, or plan. Further, students regularly find themselves in the position of writing to explain something to someone who already understands what they are attempting to explain. This contributes to a lack of both preciseness and conviction in their work, and undermines their understanding of other and different functions of writing.

The importance of self-concept

Part of the intention of this study was to begin exploration — of a limited and tentative kind — of a possible relationship between the students' language and performance on the one hand and their self-concept on the other. Most studies concerned with self-concept consider this matter in the context of a person's general, or global, self-image. Yet one needs to consider that while a person may have a strong self-concept in one area, he or she may not in another. There may therefore be a need in studies of language such as this to probe each subject's self-concepts as a learner in school and as a writer and user of language in school.

Specifically, a preliminary consideration of their global self-concept in this study was of limited value in revealing insights into any relationship between the

students' language behaviours and their self-images. However, investigation of their self-concepts as learners and users of language was revealing in this respect. The students saw themselves as failing to measure up, in some or many respects, to the standards of correctness which, in their perception, represented the requirements of writing. The results of this view were twofold: the students seemed to conclude from their failures that they had nothing worthwhile to say, and they did not appear to be willing to take risks in their writing. A cyclical relationship had developed — one which illustrates the relationship between self-concept and intention. They saw themselves as inadequate writers as a result of their teachers' emphases on their surface errors; thus they were led to expect little of their writing; and expecting little, they accomplished little.

Some implications — for teaching

A most obvious implication arising from this study concerns a need to broaden students' intentions with school language, especially writing. It appears that what students perceive as school language interferes with their discovering what writing is and what it can do.

Another implication concerns the need to be aware of a student's own language and the role this language plays in his learning. Making knowledge one's own requires the chance to formulate and reformulate ideas in the language in which one is most at ease, and that allows one to accommodate "old" knowledge to the "new." To this end schools need to encourage further use and investigation of the "expressive" language mode as a matrix for language development. In this context too, we cannot ignore the apparent strengths and competence of students' talk, particularly in areas of interest and concern to them.

Related to these, but considered particularly in the light of intention, is a final implication. There is a need to balance emphasis regarding the surface features of students' writing with concern for and response to what they are trying to say. In so doing one shifts an emphasis on pieces of writing as product, to a concern with the cognitive developmental processes of students. Response to written work matters. It is a main point of contact between teacher and students and is very important in shaping their relationship and the students' attitudes toward writing.

To achieve a proper balance in response to students' writing, one must reduce or remove the evaluative aspect in marking. In so doing one is helping to broaden their perceptions of writing; for, to be adventurous, to be willing to take risks, to open the doors to discovery, students must be free and secure. Free to explore, and secure in the knowledge that they can make mistakes without penalty. This is what Carl Rogers calls psychological freedom and safety; and this is also the learning climate that we, as teachers, need to provide for students — especially for those students who may well have negative concepts of themselves as language users.

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