

Language in Two Streams

The moral distinction in high school English

Differences in attitude among adult English-speakers towards "English" are so radical as to suggest that they represent other differences, more far-reaching and deeper-seated than we customarily assume. Some prostrate themselves before the crudest command to be correct in language; others revere and practise subtle plays of meaning in literature or speech. Such a difference in values surely has a moral dimension. Willinsky has explored the roots of these differences in a study of the different streams in a Canadian high school (reported elsewhere), and discusses here its implications. Not only different practices but also sharply different attitudes were reflected in the declarations of both teachers and students at the "academic" and the "general" level English classes. He points out that the real consequence of the way this streaming is currently being interpreted by many Canadian teachers of English is that one group of students probably acquires a moral authority that has been denied to the other. He becomes specific about the means by which teachers must rid their program of popular misconceptions about language, if it is not to continue to divide the population not only on the topic of literature, but also in social, political, and moral terms.

Few structural aspects of the modern high school seem more thoroughly set in place than the streaming of courses. Yet in a review of 52 studies of streaming at the high school level, Kulik and Kulik (1982) found that the benefits in student achievement were small, with the students in the advanced classes showing most of the gain. Streaming has resulted, moreover, in fostering certain attitudes and relationships in the school. Hargreaves (1967), for instance, observed how streaming led to a "class" system within the school; one level was played off the other by the teaching staff, and stereotypes developed which did not serve all levels equally. In a similar vein, Oakes

(1982) has demonstrated that the student's relationship to the school in the lower stream is marked by greater alienation, distance, and punitiveness.

English classes in the high school have a particular lesson to teach on the effects of streaming. Students are not only exposed to different literary texts in the English classes, but more important, they face in their classes interpretations of language which vary with the course level. In observing the English program in one Nova Scotia high school, I became convinced that the variance was in essence a moral one, based on the teachers' reading of the students' future in the language.(1) The impact of streaming on the students was reflected in their attitudes towards language and toward themselves as language users. The striking difference between the treatment of language in the lower and upper course levels appeared to be of much greater consequence than any slight gains in academic achievement would warrant.

Labellings

The course labels used for the different levels suggest one aspect of the educational rationale behind streaming. The high school prepares some students for university and some not; thus some students require "university-preparatory" classes, while others are better served by "non-college bound" courses (as they had been officially designated in Nova Scotia). Another aspect of the rationale is found in the term "ability streaming", which is used in the literature to describe the most common tiering of courses.

But the teachers with whom I spoke at the school made little reference to the students' destinations or general abilities in their comments on the streaming of courses and students. They spoke instead of character, culture, and specific competencies. The students at the general level (as the lower stream was commonly referred to) were described by one of their English teachers as essentially careless: "(They are) doing exercises (in grammar) very well, but they don't transfer it," she explained. "They look at it in a vacuum - 'You know what I mean, Miss.' - they're just careless."

Another source of differentiation for the staff was their perception that in language the black students in the school constituted a problem. The English department head felt that the black students spoke a form of English which had "no verb agreement," while the teacher in charge of the school's Writing Centre described how the black students had little grasp of word endings such as -ed, -ing, and -s. "They don't really hear them and they don't see them really."

The consequences of this assessment on the part of the teachers, of this determination of the general students' linguistic and cultural shortcomings, were a good number of lessons and exercises on capitalization, run-on sentences, punctuation, and

vocabulary development. These were interspersed throughout the more common English fare of novel and short story study. There may seem nothing remarkable about this. One may even view these grammar lessons as laced with a certain degree of optimism, as these teachers hoped to succeed where they felt others had fallen short (and where research, from Lyman (1929) to Elley et al. (1976), has suggested little is to be gained).

In both the assertion of carelessness and that of cultural difference, the teachers were taking their cues from the surface features of the students' use of language. These features distinguished the students for the teachers, and as such determined the principal differences in the curriculum for the courses. I observed the top classes at the academic level to increase the contrasts. The teacher of the grade-twelve "enriched" academic class explained that the students were distinguished by the state of their competencies and by character as well. They had mastered "the mechanics" of writing and "they generally like literature," was how the teacher described it. With these two qualities in hand, the teacher felt free to move from surface features to the deeper concerns of language. The enriched academic class was given over to the intense study of great writers and what their teacher referred to as "the ideas contained in literature." The enriched students nevertheless were not without other shortcomings in language, both in their own and in their teacher's eyes. The students expressed at times a sense of their own awkwardness and lack of organization: "I'm great at getting information, but I can't make it stick together," was how one of them put it. Their teacher felt they needed coaching in rhetoric, with which to develop their argument and build their case. He described the teaching as a matter of marginal assistance: "You just forget about all of those mechanics. The comments (in the margins of the essays) are about ... style, more often about organization, clarity of your thinking, backing it up, getting rid of any confusions."

Differences in units of attention

The difference between the two levels might be characterized by the unit and by the location of meaning to which the students' attention was directed. At the enriched level, the students have left the surface features, the mechanics, behind; they could then look through the language into something deeper - into, for example, the clarity and organization of thought. The sentence was but a building block, the paragraph a single structure, in the construction of their own ideas and those of others. This was, of course, an ideal, but it was an ideal which distinguished the streams.

At the general level the sentence, the error-free sentence, was the end rather than a means. The substance of the sentence can assist in its correct punctuation, and there was

often a subordination of meaning to form for this purpose in the course of the work on language.

The sentence was also the unit or response in the work on literature, where, for example, the focus was on identifying what has happened to whom. "What does the shark know in E.J. Pratt's 'The Shark'?" and "Who is the author?" one grade-twelve general class was asked, with a 10% penalty for spelling errors (a school policy which had been allowed to slide in the enriched-class grade twelve).

The students at both levels were dealing in plays, stories, and novels, which share a concern for the expression of feelings and ideas. These texts, each deemed suitable for their respective grade and level, did not however differ in their approach to language to the degree to which the streams did. The streams distinguished where the students' interests in language must lie in a way in which the texts do not; the difference is between the emphasis on language's surface features and the exploration of ideas and art in language. Based on differences, measurable differences, in the students' mastery of standard English, the teachers have designed courses "to meet the students' needs." The effect was to demean the role of language and literacy at one level and elevate it at the other - not in every instance, of course, but often enough to keep the distinction between the streams clear.

Unwanted consequences

One reason for suggesting that these differences have become exaggerated was that the enriched students did not show an appreciably more profound regard for either literature or language. Many of them were less than ardent or lucid in their response to the great works they were reading. They were sure this literature was famous, and of course "It's old," as one of them said in its defence. They understood that literature had significance and thus stood for privilege, but it was also, and more clearly so, the text on which they were to practise and improve their mastery of schooling.

Certainly, the literature used in the academic classes provided more in substance - aesthetically, psychologically, politically, and even sexually - than the novels of S.E.Hinton and Farley Mowat used at the general level. Apparent as this was to English teachers trained in literature, it was still less than clear to the enriched English students with whom I spoke. The requirement for entrance into an enriched English course was "enthusiasm", as the course booklet termed it, and 80% in the previous year. The enthusiasm which I witnessed was much more a matter of diligence and commitment toward making the best of school, than of a particular love of literature. There were some who expressed a strong interest in literature, and certainly the teacher was passionately devoted to it; enthusiastic students mixed in with the diligent ones enabled the

teacher to go far in exploring the argument of a great number of writers.

In my discussions with the students in general-level English, little doubt was expressed about the importance of standard English; they believed that the school's concern with correction was in line with the ways of the world. They spoke, almost in a single voice, of the job interview as the moment for which this stress on standard English through a dozen years of English classes would pay off. The principal point appeared to be, at that culminating moment, not to "sound dumb". One result of this emphasis on errors was expressed by two of the more accomplished general-level English students who told me that their ability to determine the errors of others was proof of their mastery of the language. As one of them put it, "When somebody, in speech, can pick out the wrong mistake, then you know something." The considerable regard paid in this way to the formalities of language encourages a particular sort of linguistic self-consciousness. Whatever degree of mastery the students do achieve, they did seem to learn the exact instances of their errors. For example, a student repeating grade ten explained, "Say I write something, just little errors; say I write something like 'I must of been,' they would correct it - 'I must have been.' "

The approach to language used in the general level, however justified by attitudes prevalent in the marketplace, robbed language of significance in two ways. The first of these was a denigration of that language which the students have grown up with and which continues to be the medium of expression in their family and community. This objection has become a commonplace over the course of the last decade, and at least one group of English teachers (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974) has responded with a resolution declaring a "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (though they have recently experienced something of a change of heart: see Sledd, 1983). But after a decade of such concerns elsewhere, students in this school were still learning that much of what they say was wrong, and that their speech was ineffective communication as if it were something of a non-language, though their daily experience with it would have surely denied this. The extent of the students' acceptance of this judgement was expressed by a number of the students taking general English. One suggested that he had trouble understanding himself when he used what he referred to as his "lower class" talk, while another felt that her language was good only for "sassing" and not for making her point in class (though, of course, the sassing made a point of its own).

But as well as teaching in the general level class having taken from students' language where it should have given, the focus on grammar and surface feature reduced language to the expression and communication of adherence to form. Language and literacy were transformed into a deference to propriety, to sounding as if you went to school and took it very seriously.

Other conceptions of language cannot help but be sabotaged by this singular regard for form at the general level. Conceptions of the expressive power of language were at stake, along with language's ability to initiate and accomplish activities, to move people by words alone. The students' outspokenness was to be contained in class rather than redirected, and language as a challenge to the ways of the world was not so much excluded as buried beneath what counts in evaluating students.

Different treatments, on a moral level

At the enriched academic level, the concern with language at least approached these more powerful conceptions of language. Both in class and assignments, the students were encouraged to argue convincingly, if not with conviction, the merits of a king's course of action (in *Macbeth*) or a lover's seductive plea (in Donne's "The Flea"). They were coached from the sidelines (or the margins) to make their cases coherent and persuasive so that their position could not be easily denied. There were conventions and formalities still to be mastered at this level. A student told me that the secret of success at the enriched level was "to sound like you know what you're talking about," which is a convention of sorts. Though reminiscent of the "sounding dumb" comment at the general level, it still spoke to an expectation among enriched students of a substance to their language, of at least having something to say. The enriched academic students were assumed by their teachers to have an argument to make; they were expected to judge and to use language ably to defend those judgements.

Thus I would argue that they were accorded by their teachers a respect which differs on a moral level from the regard paid to students at the general level. The enriched students were to be entrusted with both the language and the power of judgement. With the mechanics of the standard in hand, and their commitment established, the English language was regarded as theirs, and the faults they would become skilled in detecting were those of kings and lovers. At the general level, the students' own language was the focus of judgement to the degree that it met or missed the ways of the standard, whether in the exercises which were designed to represent the students' faults or in a more direct manner. The students at the general level had to prove that their language was becoming more conventional, rather than that their ideas were becoming more persuasive. Their own language having been the point of judgement, at best they might turn this around to the point where they were able to detect the errors of others. The general level students were saddled with the subject of their alleged inadequacy, while the best of the academic students were to pursue the object of their enthusiasm.

A training in moral authority - given, and denied

The concentration of the enriched class on the who and how of guilt and motive, on the development of a well-armed position from which to argue the significance of literary lives, can also be imagined to encourage a greater sense of moral authority in these students than was available to students in the general level classes. "The classic defence of literary study," Lionel Trilling has written, "holds that, from the mobilising and liberalising of the sentiments which the study of literature brings about, there results, or can be made to result, an improvement in the intelligence, and especially the intelligence as it touches the moral life". (1965, p.4) More recently, George Grant has noted that literature has supplanted theology and philosophy as the noble calling of the educated mind (1983). In the enriched academic class, the students were initiated into the exclusive and (to many of the students with whom I spoke) mystifying ways of literature. The benefits to the intelligence as it touches the moral life amounted to a different encouragement in language; it had become the student's right to view language as the means of making literary and moral judgements. In the presence of literature, the students would first grow thoughtful and then wise.

But this advantage which they were believed to have earned extends beyond literature and art. The students were also being encouraged in the art of rhetoric, through literature and the literary essay. At the root of democracy in ancient Greece, a training in art of persuasion was first conceived as essential for participation in the governing of the state. James Kinneavy, who would restore rhetoric to the English curriculum, has expressed this as the need "to train citizens to be persuasive in a political environment". (1982, p.21) As he notes, rhetoric has fallen from grace in the schools but here in the enriched English classes, the students were receiving some measure of preparation for a greater participation in the polis. This training was not equally distributed among the Greeks, nor is it yet equally distributed in the modern high school.

Students of one group have had their attention directed to the avoidance of errors - an inducement to silence; while those of another have been prompted to develop their voices that they might be heard. Yet in the hallways and the classrooms there were general student voices to be heard; many were outspoken. But speaking out in class, pejoratively referred to by teachers, falls outside the scheme of the streams. Belligerence was not about to be tolerated at any level in the school; at the general level, however, no alternative channels for expression were encouraged. General-level English classes treated language manners as a matter both of the curriculum and of classroom management, a two-pronged attack on what was ultimately a political issue of power and persuasion. The teachers regarded the outspokenness of students as an occupational hazard of teaching general classes, not as a possible comment on

democratic enfranchisement.

A practical rhetoric, in class

One might argue at this point, as well as at others in this paper, that by virtue of their attitudes and abilities the students had brought on themselves this difference in regard. But in this case of speaking out, the failure of manners was, on the one hand, a sort of endorsement of the curriculum's focus on only the surface features of language, and on the other, a rudimentary rhetorical ploy intended to influence the teacher. (It often worked. But the teacher was still more likely to interpret it as a personal attack rather than as a political statement.) The question is whether this outspokenness by a noisy few, or, for that matter, the carelessness with capitalization, demanded the particular differences in the approach to language which marked the streams. The students and teachers both contributed to the unfolding of classroom patterns; both learned from the other in this; yet one does not need to disentangle the web of cause and effect in these responses in order to suggest that an alternative approach is possible. The teachers might have treated speaking out as a rhetoric which arises out of the social resources at hand; they might have considered in a class on language its effectiveness, limitations, and accessibility (I found that the boys were tougher on the girls who spoke out in class than was the teacher). Such could be the first step in a rhetoric for general level classes, a study of being persuasive in a political environment.

It should be clear by this point that language is as often a social, political, and moral issue in the English classroom, is a literary one. Is there too much here then for the concerned English teacher to handle? Streaming is not about to be dismantled, but the teachers' conceptions of the streams could stand some revision. The teacher interested in redressing the imbalance between the streams could begin by conceiving a different future in the language for students in the general classes, one in which the students might expect to have positions to ably defend - moral and political questions to explore and decide. The teacher, to make this first leap (and it is one that will take imagination and verve), will also have to reconceive the matter of language differences and the significance of dialects, to which the pamphlet "Students' Right to Their Own Language" serves as an excellent introduction. English teachers have to rid their program in language of popular misconceptions, not so much about the social importance of the standard to which the students are so attuned, as about its inherent virtues. These attitudes of linguistic superiority do as little to encourage the students' development in language and literacy as do the exercises in grammar.

Still this focus on adherence to conventions in standard English most clearly distinguishes the streaming of English

classes. As such it tends to exaggerate the differences between students, and forms the basis of the moral distinction behind the treatment of language in the streams. In light of the merely marginal gains in achievement for the better students as a result of streaming, it is a moral distinction which I feel is difficult to defend. To encourage one level in the fashioning of arguments and the other in adhering to formalities makes a disturbing contribution to education in language, and does not seem necessary to the division of classes into streams.

NOTE

1. The observations reported here are based on a study of four English classes in a single high school - a grade ten general level and advanced academic level, and a grade twelve general level and enriched academic level. A Sentence Completion Test on language and stream attitudes was administered to the students of the four classes, and twenty of the students along with the four teachers were interviewed. Classroom observations were conducted over the second term of the school year. For a full report of the study and its findings, see my "The Well-Tempered Tongue: The Politics of Standard English in the High School" (New York: Peter Lang, in press).

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