

Language and Learning Across the Curriculum

James Britton

Editor's note: It may be useful to readers of this essay by James Britton to recall the distinctions Britton makes between **transac-tional** language--"language to get things done" (*DWA*, 88); **expressive** language--language "that might be called 'thinking aloud'" (*DWA*, 89); and **poetic** language--"language as an art medium" (*DWA*, 90).

I think we need to be clear at the outset that a concern for **Language Across the Curriculum** is not, in the final analysis, a concern for language--for the oracy and literacy of the students we teach--but a concern for the **quality of learning** in all subjects. This is politic--for how could teachers of the other subjects be persuaded that what the English teacher is paid to do must be shared around amongst all members of staff? But it is far more than politic: It is no less than a challenge to all teachers to consider the **processes of learning**, both in their own subjects and in the whole curriculum. It is a challenge to them to make a much needed, little heeded distinction between rote learning and genuine learning--little heeded because our policies for school organisation and pupil evaluation tend to blur that distinction. What has to be realised is that learning is not a uni-directional process (what the teacher "gives off," the pupil absorbs) but an interactional one, essentially social in nature--teachers and students learning with each other and from each other. Only in this way can what is learnt in school subjects effectively become a part of an individual's total learning pattern, his world-knowledge and his self-knowledge--in practical terms, his "know-how" in the here and now, and in terms of a wider understanding his "theory of the world in the head," as Frank Smith has called it (Smith, 11).

The view I am taking--that knowledge is a process of knowing rather than a store-house of the known--is easily ridiculed. A story went the rounds some years ago of an inspector who asked a pupil, "Where is Newcastle?" and the pupil replied, "I don't know where Newcastle is, but if you'll tell me where it is, I'll tell you why it's there." A more recent story--and I know this one is true--will serve to turn the tables: a geography teacher in an Australian school was being rated by an angry parent. "My son isn't learning anything in your lessons. He doesn't even know the names of the principal ports of Australia." The teacher (sticking his neck out): "Well, Madam, do you?" Her reply: "Of course I don't, but I learnt them when I was at school!"

To Michael Polanyi, scientist and philosopher,

*"Knowledge is an activity which would be better described as a process of knowing. Indeed, as the scientist goes on enquiring into yet uncomprehended experiences, so do those who accept his discoveries as established knowledge keep applying this to ever changing situations, developing it each time a step further. Research is an intensely dynamic enquiring, while knowledge is a more quiet research. Both are for ever on the move, according to similar principles, towards a deeper understanding of what is already known" (Polanyi, *Knowing*, 132).*

To view knowledge as a "quiet form of research" constitutes, as I have suggested, a challenge to our conception of the learning process. A science teacher at a London conference on **Language**

Across the Curriculum made his response to the challenge in these words:

*"There seem to be two different and conflicting goals in science education: one is to teach a body of accepted knowledge, the other is to teach the **process** by which that knowledge has been acquired. One of these goals--the former--continues to be dominant in science teaching today, but I believe the latter goal--the process of science--is by far the most important. The way we work is bound up with the way we use language, and a change in emphasis from science as knowledge to science as process would require, amongst other things, a change in the way we use language" (Martin, et al., 165).*

Many teachers in science as well as the humanities are shifting the focus of their pedagogy from **product** (knowledge) to **process** because they are coming to new understandings of the relationship between language and learning. Those of us who are interested in this relationship have learnt a great deal from Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, about the way talking and writing function as means of learning (the way infant speech, for example, lays the foundations for adult thinking). Recently, thanks to the labours of four American editors, we have a posthumous work by Vygotsky which gives his views about writing in greater detail (Vygotsky, Mind, Chpt. 8). He claims here that mastery of writing comes from using it to satisfy some need or fulfill some intention--something out and beyond the act of writing itself--just as speech is acquired in infancy for the purpose of understanding and controlling the environment. It is difficult at first to see how utterly opposed this is to the traditional view in schools that writing is learned by practising it under the guidance of an expert who will tell you how well or how poorly you have performed.

Looking at the curriculum as a whole, then, I want briefly to suggest three purposes that writing might achieve for children in school.

First, there is that of establishing and maintaining a satisfying personal relationship with the teacher. If we take an interactional view of learning, it follows that we cannot effectively teach strangers: development of a personal relationship is essential. Journal writing--a written dialogue between pupil and teacher--is one very useful way of doing this. Take for example these extracts from the journal of a nine-year-old girl in a Toronto school (with her teacher's responses):

Jan. 20th, 1978. After my rough copy of my project I am going to rearrange my project around. I am going to put growing up first page. What monkeys do to eat in second page. Why do monkeys make faces page three.

(Sounds interesting!)

Jan. 25. It was interesting. Did you think it was very interesting or interesting or just a little interesting?...

Feb. 20. When you were away the class had other teachers. The first teacher's name was Mrs. G. and the second teacher's name was Mr. M. They were both nice teachers. You know sometimes I wish you were my mother.

(Lots of the time I wish I had a little girl like you!)

Feb. 21. It's too bad I'm Chinese because if I was English you could adopt me."

The second purpose appropriate to writing in school is learning in the widely accepted sense of that word: organising our knowledge of the world and extending it in an organised way so that it remains coherent, unified, reliable: building into our knowledge-from-experience the knowledge we take on trust from other people's experiences. I have before me a splendid example, a seventy-page book on Marine animals produced by fourth- and fifth-grade children in a California school. Chapter One begins: "The sea is

(cont. on p. 93)

use of "language more widely rather than more 'correctly'" (Martin, p. 166). A further study, of children aged 7 to 9, agrees with all the work that has followed from the Bullock Committee's recommendations: "A concern for purpose and audience, for patterns of development in language mastery, for the effects of context on writing, for the treatment of writing and action to ease the learner's difficulties, is the foundation on which a policy for writing may be elaborated with some confidence" (Harpin, p. 156).

Various professional publications have summarized the new trends in British education for an American audience (for instance, Gerrard and a series of articles in English Journal). Among the best and most provocative of the British studies is one still little known here, and its conclusion parallels the views of faculty at **The University of Michigan** and at many other American schools: "To plan ways in which we can effectively improve our pupils' learning is inevitably to consider how we use language, the language environment of our school, the language expectations we have of our pupils, and the tuition and encouragement we give in language" (Marland, p. 264). In promoting **Writing Across the Curriculum**, American teachers need imaginative and persuasive principles and techniques; the British approach has much to instruct us in our task.

Richard W. Bailey teaches language and literature courses at **The University of Michigan** where he also serves as Director of Research for the **ECB**. Professor Bailey, who frequently writes about language variety and stylistics, is coordinating the "**Literacy in the 1980's**" conference to be held in Ann Arbor in June, 1981.

Jernigan (cont. from p. 74)

understandably eager to demonstrate their prowess in their own fields, to teach the writing component, what will in fact happen to the onerous, unappealing task of teaching writing? I fear that, in spite of orientation programs offered them in the teaching of writing, the graduate assistants will neglect writing in favor of their subject matter. If instead these same courses are relegated to non-tenured

junior staff members, who know the facts of academic life and are eager to earn tenure, won't the same thing happen to the tedious job of teaching writing? We must wait for the Class of '83 to graduate to discover how successful the program is.

Ah, but if in actuality we could incorporate the teaching of writing in courses beyond introductory composition within the student's own field, if we could indeed convince the entire academic community that good writing is everyone's responsibility, then I too would lift my voice in strident yea-saying. For under such a system my colleague from another department would be less self-righteous, realizing that the teaching of writing is his job too.

Jay Jernigan was the first Director of Introductory Composition at **Eastern Michigan University**, Ypsilanti, Michigan, where he teaches courses in literature and writing today.

Britton (cont. from p. 56)

a radiant water galaxy. It's a world of its own in a special way. Under its foam crested surface, there exists a universe of plant and animal life. With the tiniest microscopic beings to the most humungus creature that ever lived, the sea is alive!" (Our Friends in the Waters, a Book on Marine Mammals Written by the Kids in Room 14, Old Mill School, Mill Valley, California, 1979).

I shall call this kind of learning **Learning I** in order to distinguish it from my third category of purpose, **Learning II**. In **Learning I**, we are in fact organising the objective aspects of our experience; in **Learning II** we are organising the subjective aspects of our experience, and though it is a familiar enough process, we do not usually recognize it as learning. The principle of organization of **Learning I** is, in essence, logical: that of **Learning II** is artistic. In the terms devised by the **London Writing Research Project**, **Learning I** employs language in the role of participant--a spectrum from Expressive to Transactional; that of **Learning II** is language in the role of spectator--a spectrum from Expressive to Poetic

(Britton, The Dev., Chpt. 15). As the stories children write (whether autobiographical or fictional) become "shaped stories," more art-like, they move from the Expressive towards the Poetic. The more "shaped" they become, the more effectively they enable writers to explore and express their values, those ways of feeling and believing about the world that make us the sorts of people we are. I think you will sense this happening in the little story written by a six-and-a-half-year-old English girl:

There was a child of a witch who was ugly. He had pointed ears thin legs and was born in a cave. He flew in the air holding on nothing just playing games.

When he saw ordinary girls and boys he hit them with his broomstick. A cat came along. he arched his back at the girls and boys and made them run away. When they had gone far away the cat meowed softly at the witch child. the cat loved the child. the child loved the cat the cat was the onlee thing the child loved in the world.

In a subject-based curriculum (as far as using language is concerned), **Learning I** will be the principal focus for lessons in science, history, geography, social studies, while **Learning II** will be the principal focus in English lessons.

Whether the topic be marine animals or ugly witches, what teachers and students say and write makes learning manifest. Thus there is in every classroom evidence of one kind of learning or another--neither of which a teacher can afford to ignore. Further, it is my experience that when teachers of different disciplines study such evidence jointly, important pedagogical and curricular issues come up for discussion.

James Britton, author of numerous books and articles in the field of composition theory and research, is associated with the **University of London Institute of Education**.

Odell (cont. from p. 59)

institutions, inventions, or anything else the narrator mentions.

In order to determine when the book was originally published (and thereby formulate one's thesis) one might:

--focus on inventions and customs mentioned in the book;

--identify inventions and customs not mentioned in the book but known to us today;

--determine dates (e.g., the date at which a particular invention was made) for things that are mentioned and for things that are not mentioned in the book;

--consider alternate conclusions about the publication date of the book and explain how those conclusions are less plausible than one's own.

Without presuming that this brief list identifies all the intellectual work a writer might engage in, I want to use this list to make two points. The first is that the intellectual work associated with the Looking Backward task is somewhat different from that involved in the writing assignments mentioned earlier. In their letters of complaint, the eighth graders would need to (1) explain what they expected or hoped; (2) show that their experience fell short of what they had expected; and (3) explain a specific sequence of actions that would resolve the conflict between experience and expectations. In describing their system for organizing laboratory equipment, high school chemistry students would have to classify items on the basis of their use in various experiments. My first point, then, is that different writing tasks make different intellectual demands of writers. My second point is that teachers can show students how to meet those demands. For example, the history teacher who assigned the Looking Backward paper might make a practice of having students examine short texts, trying to date those texts by determining, say, what inventions the author does mention and what inventions, known today, the author does not mention. The advantage of this teaching