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Language Studies—Where to Begin

Ralph L. Corrigan, Jr.

Language study is incredibly complex. Ask any beleaguered undergraduate in teacher education trying desperately to juggle at least the basics of the traditional, structural and transformational approaches to language. Or better yet, ask those hapless teachers tackling the new grammar on their own while burning the midnight oil, surrounded by sheaves of paper filled with branching tree diagrams. The question in the minds of many teachers of language today is: where do I begin?

First, we must spend some time talking *with* our students about language. At the very outset, the teacher must remember that the way language study is approached will in large measure determine the success of the unit. Motivation is the key. To put to the class the question "What is language?" is hardly enough. In fact, it's inviting disaster.

Begin, instead, by asking the students to pretend they are back in prehistoric times. Don't even mention that this is the beginning of a language study unit. Create an imaginative prehistoric setting that is believable. Then with the help of the class, fill in the specific details. The aim is to discover what it was like to live in that period of time when man first began to attach meanings to the grunts and gestures

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of his fellows. Pursue a series of questions like the following:

1. What kind of clothing did men and women wear?
2. What were their shelters like?
3. What kind of food did they eat, and how did they obtain it?
4. What was the social structure under which people lived?
5. What sort of tools and utensils were available for use?

Place the responses of the students on the board. Then, once the atmosphere of the times has been at least partially captured, begin to investigate how language might have evolved at the time. Through guided discussion, the class should be brought to realize that at one time man communicated in an animal-like fashion. The students should be encouraged to discover for themselves how human speech evolved from simple grunts and body language to complex syntactic structures. And it is far better to forget at this time the scholarly theories of how language began. Know them, yes. But don't diminish the exhilaration of the students as they explore their own theories governing what must have occurred way back when.

As a related activity, consider having the class write a brief play illustrating man's early attempts at communication. Then act out the play in the classroom, and let the imagination be the guide as to how extensive a production it should be.

The important point to be made here is

that answers to questions will be more meaningful when the students have been allowed to "discover" whatever answers they can by themselves. Language histories will equip the teacher with resource information, but even a back-up text is largely superfluous. The point of the introductory lesson is to engender a spirit of enquiry and discovery, guided essentially by a strong dosage of common sense. It was Robert Frost, I think, who said of his teaching techniques that he never asked a question in class that he knew the answer to. Language study lends itself beautifully to Frost's design for instruction.

Pursuing a rough, historical chronology, the next language exercise can be the development of a prehistoric lexicon. Relying heavily on the prehistoric setting, and essentially on man's early quest for survival, encourage the class to make a list of words that they might expect to find in the daily vocabulary of the Stone Age man. Begin by listing vocal sounds symbolizing things, and then sounds symbolizing actions. When the lexicon is finished, a well-timed question such as "which class of words came first?" provides plenty of lively debate.

The next point to concern the class with is man's discovery of written communication. Here the discovery approach can be used to great advantage. Early in the discussions, some time could be profitably spent discovering reasons why man invented the writing system in the first place. Then students might be divided into clans (normally four to six students to a clan) with each clan instructed to draw a "pictograph" (picture with a message) to send to another clan. In this exercise, the teacher draws a simple pictograph on the board as an illustration. When the class exchanges the messages, an attempt is made to decipher their meanings. Upon completion of the exercise, each clan might be given five

minutes to formulate a commentary on the pictographic method of communication.

The next class exercise involves "ideographic" writing. Rather than rely on a single picture, people found that they could draw a series of pictures or symbols which enabled them to communicate larger and more sophisticated units of meaning. One exercise connected with the study of ideographic writing is to invite the class to produce their own ideographic writing system. A student of mine, a few years ago, invented his own ideographic language, then wrote a brief story using his own symbols. The trick here is to keep symbols simple, and to make sure each symbol has attached to it a universal meaning. Another point to remember is that while working with ideographic symbols, much can be done to familiarize the students with the forms and classes of words. How, for example, are the plurals to be formed or the verb tenses? The student mentioned earlier simply placed an arrow pointing down (\downarrow) either before or after the verb-symbol to denote past or future action. (The arrow was drawn directly above the symbol to denote present action.) After this exercise, it is good practice to divide the class into clans (as with the pictographic writing), and charge each clan to write an ideographic message. Once the messages have been exchanged and deciphered, then the class can compare ideographic and pictographic writing. What are the limitations of each, and what are the advantages of the former?

Finally, in this brief introduction to language studies, the class can explore the ramifications of one of the most startlingly brilliant discoveries: the phonological writing system which designated specific written characters for individual sounds in a language. Let the class wrestle with the steps that must have been taken in moving from the drawing of pictures to the idea of

symbolizing sounds. Also, this is a good time to make students aware of the fact that the written word is but a symbol for the spoken word, and furthermore, that the spoken word is again only a symbol for the piece of reality that it represents. In other words, written communication employs symbols to represent symbols, which in turn represent reality as we perceive it.

At this juncture, the students should be eager for the rigors of phonology, morphology and syntax. This is not to suggest

that the discovery method no longer applies when the class reaches the study of the phonological system. At each step along the way, the class must find out the observable facts about language for themselves, and with a little inventiveness on the part of the teacher, this can be accomplished. The point to remember is that language study is indeed alive and well, and that it no longer need be relegated to drills and countless "exceptions to the rule."

INVITATION FOR MANUSCRIPTS

An invitation is extended to teachers and other educators at elementary, secondary, and college-university levels to share ideas on changes in classroom practices which resulted from "Re-Vision" or reflection or from external pressure. Each article should describe a change in classroom procedures relating to the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, listening, or to student evaluation, communication skills, film and media, emotional demands on students or teachers, or any other concern. Each article, which can range up to 2000 words, should describe the new practice, whether or not it was successful, and what stimulated the change. Two copies should be mailed before April 15 to Allen Berger, Co-editor, *Classroom Practices in Teaching English*, The University of Alberta Education Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.