Language Instruction at the Secondary Level

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The title of the program for which this paper was prepared, “What Philosophy Should Underlie Language Instruction at the Secondary Level?” can be read in ambiguous ways. It is possible to give a falling intonation pattern to the sentence, stress the modal “should,” and thus suggest quite strongly—and, I think, wrongly—that there is a particular philosophy, suited especially to language instruction, that I am in a position to reveal to you. I do not presume to be in such a position, but I do want to share with you the sorts of questions I found myself posing in addressing this topic. It seems to me that what we are discussing here, in fact, is the nature of the role that should be played by the teacher; and to do that, we might first ask what the nature of the English language curriculum should be, and what that of the language learner is.

Now I suppose if the topic “What Is English?” appears once more on a conference program for teachers or is the issue to be discussed in a seminar, symposium, forum, meeting, or kaffee klatsch, hardly any of us would be blamed for choosing the alternative of early retirement from the profession. I do not intend to belabor the English curriculum problem with you, though obviously what we take that curriculum to be affects our design for instruction. Rather I shall try to draw the connections between two kinds of English curriculum envisioned by the profession historically and associate with them the role I see the teacher playing. I shall also speculate in a concluding section on the possible relevance that current transformational study holds for us teachers of English—though perhaps the term generative semantics is now more appropriate than generative grammar. These associated connections are further complicated by our assessment of how children learn their language. Thus there are three parts, I think, that need to be related in my topic: the curriculum, learning theory, especially vis-à-vis language acquisition, and teaching strategy, that is, how the teacher might combine what he knows about curriculum and language acquisition to make the outcome meaningful for the student. My thesis is that one way to illustrate a specific philosophy of language instruction is through the teacher’s conception of what his role is; developing an ideal philosophy of language instruction involves the conceptualizing of an ideal role for the teacher of English.

I

The two characterizations of curriculum I’ve chosen for this kind of brief analysis are the language arts program and the equally well-known tripod of language, literature, and composition. First, the language arts curriculum. This is probably best described in the curriculum series prepared by the Commission
on the English Curriculum of the NCTE. Volume III of the series, *The English Language Arts in the Secondary School*, shows what the underlying philosophy of the entire series is by trying to develop competencies in the language arts to meet youth's needs in a "world of change, of speed, of massed groups, of heightened tensions, and of gravely conflicting views . . ."¹ The Commission quite clearly saw a relationship between the social order and the work of the English teacher, as this excerpt illustrates:

Special emphasis should be given in the program of the language arts to the fact that the locus of every social problem is in an individual personality, striving to find some security within himself through which he may hope to be equal to the conflicting demands of the life about him. Later chapters in this volume will illustrate from the classrooms of the country what the teaching of literature and of imaginative expression in both speech and writing can do to foster this security and the individuality of which it is a part. These chapters demonstrate also that the problems of communication, both intimately personal and set in the framework of social conflict, are a major concern of the program in the language arts today.²

The job of the language arts teacher is to improve his students' competencies in the arts of reading, speaking, writing, and listening; and to achieve these ends he is willing to use grammar, literature, writing activities—in short, whatever content seems likely to help reach his goals.

The adolescent that the language arts teacher confronted was to be as thoroughly understood as possible; a sound psychology of adolescence was to undergird the language arts program. In turn, a sound language arts program was to contribute to the development of a healthy personality in the young student. The English classroom, by providing opportunities for a great many experiences in literature, drama, and creative writing, would help the adolescent realize his potential, discover for himself what he really believed.

What then was the role of the language arts teacher in this curriculum? To a large extent, I think, it was that of a friendly guide, one who knew the territory, of course, but one who also was aware of the comfort needs of the traveler. The trick was to reach the destination unharmed, without undue stress or inconvenience. The route to be followed therefore could match, but never challenge or exceed, the assumed capability of the traveler. To succeed, the teacher needed to be skillful at devising alternate routes, a master of methods applying different techniques to engage the interest of indifferent students. No part of the English curriculum was indispensable, he felt, for he saw his role as that of a selector from a rich profusion of instructional materials that would provide meaningful experiences. And he seemed to be less interested in the source and nature of these instructional materials than in discovering how they could best be introduced to engage the concern of the adolescent student.

One could argue, I think, that what the language arts program set out to do, it has done, and done reasonably well, too. Given the enormous diversity of the student population—in social class, intelligence, linguistic experience, ethnic

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² *Ibid.*. p. 11.
tradition—the program proved to have a remarkable flexibility, in fact. Paradoxically, this very flexibility in the language arts program masked a deficiency for which it came under increasing attack. For what made it adaptable so readily to the needs of widely differing students was partly its lack of commitment to any supportive academic disciplines. It was this absence of a well-conceptualized content that gradually aroused uneasiness in the profession. The purveyors, after all, should know their product.

Once the profession decided that it was remiss in its conceptualization of the curriculum, it embarked upon a remarkable series of self-flagellations. For openers, recall that the Basic Issues Conference of 1958 called for nothing less than a sweeping revision of the teaching of English from kindergarten through the graduate school. Anyone who has written, or read, any of the introductory sections to the numerous proposals for English institutes, research projects, or curriculum studies knows that this criticism from within continues apace!

In the interval, an aroused political community, exhibiting the Sputnik syndrome, had become willing to promote educational change with a generous infusion of federal money; and curriculum reformers, thus challenged, were quick to explore ways in which meaningful innovations could be developed and incorporated into school programs. Confronted with sudden opportunity, the English profession found the task of curriculum reform a formidable one. There was major disagreement about the individual components of the English curriculum, though by now the dominant view endorsed the tripod long advocated by the Commission on English of the College Entrance Examination Board: language, composition, and literature. The incredibly thin preparation many teachers of English had received in their college programs contributed to the disarray into which the curriculum had fallen. More than half of the secondary English classrooms were staffed by teachers who had only minored in English; another disturbingly large number had less than a minor in English, certification regulations in various states setting forth only minimal requirements.

Less publicized, though doubtless of at least equal importance, is the plight of even the best-prepared teachers of English, the full-fledged English majors. Because they have in the main completed their university work several years ago, the current scholarly ferment of discovery and controversy in the various disciplines subsumed under the English curriculum has scarcely touched them. According to a significant national survey reported in the provocative NCTE publication *The National Interest and the Teaching of English*, a course in modern English grammar, for example, is required in less than a fifth of the 374 colleges preparing teachers of English. Yet the insights developed by linguists into the ways language is structured have been revolutionary and are fraught with pedagogical promise. The predictive power of transformation theory, moreover, may lead to new psychological insights into the nature of learning as well as into the pupil’s ability to manipulate the sentences of his

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language. Many teachers still do not appreciate fully the linguists' objections to Latinate descriptions of the syntactic structures of modern English. Without a concept of dialects in English, many teachers are unable to develop in their pupils a sense of appropriateness in speech and writing. Few can draw upon a firsthand acquaintance with the historical developments of modern English in exploring language changes with their classes.

But the curriculum reformer had been thrust into a real predicament: there was now a greater demand for his product than his technology enabled him to provide. In addition, this heightened demand was for quality programs—"excellence" is the catchword now—innovatively directed away from the status quo. Clearly, he had now been challenged to develop demonstrably superior curricula, superior in terms of behavioral outcomes that could be objectively assessed. And the call for excellence was not merely vocal; it was funded. Curriculum development programs in English were stimulated in 1962 as Project English was funded under the Cooperative Research Branch of the U.S. Office of Education. By 1966 a network of twenty-five Curriculum Study and Demonstration Centers had been funded on the strength of the proposals submitted. With the subsequent inclusion of English in the National Defense Education Act, colleges and universities were enabled to bring thousands of practicing English teachers back to campus to continue their education. Further opportunities for inservice education became available through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and the Higher Education Act (1965). National awareness of the impoverished state of the English curriculum and of English teacher preparation was now being translated into federal support to effect needed changes.

How, we might ask, has the conceptualization of the language component changed as a result of this new, funded research thrust? The most fundamental change, it seems to me, occurred in the basis for organizing the material. No longer were terms like student growth or need crucial concerns; rather, the logic of the discipline was to determine appropriate sequence, and, since each discipline is unique, each subject matter area would be uniquely organized. A corollary of this basis for organizing instruction is the fact that the content was now quite clearly based in the relevant disciplines of linguistics, literary criticism, and rhetoric. Thus the dichotomy between school level activity in language and the research level was heightened; grammar, for example, was flourishing as an area of study and research in college departments of English and linguistics and at the same time languishing in the schools. Indeed, the language arts program had been ambivalent both about the place of grammar in the English curriculum and about the nature of grammar itself. As Gleason observes in *Linguistics and English Grammar*,

The grammar taught in the American schools had never put much stress on the system. "Functional grammar" and similar movements of the twenties and thirties emphasized its tendencies to atomism. This led to a remarkable development. While the content of the grammar course contracted markedly, the time devoted to grammar shrank much less, if at all. A great deal more time was needed for the material that was retained. As items were deleted from the eighth-grade syllabus they were replaced
by additional review of points presented in the seventh. The curriculum seemed to be approaching the strange condition of being almost entirely review. This yearly reiteration was necessitated by the failure of students to learn. In turn it aggravated the situation by adding boredom to vacuity.  

Consider, again, how widely different are the conceptions of grammar in the schools and grammar in linguistics. As taught in the schools, grammar appears totally divorced from any currently active discipline and is often justified on the ground that it undergirds instruction in good usage and composition—support, incidentally, that it has proven unable to give.

II

Grammar, as the transformationalist understands it, is a system of rules that corresponds to the competence of the native speaker. It is a theory that tries to show how sound and meaning are interrelated by the grammar of a language, how its sentences are formed and understood. Investigating the structure of a theory that deals with sentence formation should increase understanding of language acquisition and language development. The empirical investigation of language acquisition and language development in turn should lead to increased understanding of the logical structure of the theory. How language is learned is a puzzling and controversial topic for the psychologist. And although virtually every child acquires a language, what he does in learning it is nevertheless a remarkable accomplishment. As Chomsky points out in his review of Skinner’s book Verbal Behavior,

It is not easy to accept the view that a child is capable of constructing an extremely complex mechanism for generating a set of sentences, some of which he has heard, or that an adult can instantaneously determine whether (and if so, how) a particular item is generated by this mechanism, which has many of the properties of an abstract deductive theory. Yet this appears to be a fair description of the performance of the speaker, listener, and learner. If this is correct, we can predict that a direct attempt to account for the actual behavior of speaker, listener, and learner, not based on a prior understanding of the structure of grammars, will achieve very limited success. The grammar must be regarded as a component in the behavior of the speaker and listener which can only be inferred . . . from the resulting physical acts. The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling, or “hypothesis-formulating” ability of unknown character and complexity.

Children have more competence in language than the linguist is yet able to describe; that is, they know more grammar than has been codified. Remarkably, however, students in our secondary schools are convinced—and readily admit—that they do not know any grammar. Such lack of confidence in their awareness of how their language works is bound to hamper their use of the language, but, more important, it indicates that they have been misled.

Since language is probably the most distinctively human characteristic, it should be worth some study for itself. Too often, however, students are required only to learn the terms of what appears to be a closed descriptive system, a system presented as certain, complete, and pedagogically useful—though this usefulness is to follow later, much later. Promises are reassuring, but it is dishonest to present a simplified analysis of English with a certitude that not only ignores the rich complexities of its underlying regularity but in effect denies its existence. The student is disadvantaged by such a curriculum. And so, really, is the teacher. As teachers, we take delight in sharing what we know; we should also be willing to share our ignorance with our students and undertake the study of our language with an open mind. I think Chomsky's observation about the missed opportunity that results from using a limited grammar is relevant here:

... it is important for students to realize how little we know about the rules that determine the relation of sound and meaning in English, about the general properties of human language, about the matter of how the incredibly complex system of rules that constitutes a grammar is acquired or put to use. Few students are aware of the fact that in their normal, everyday life they are constantly creating new linguistic structures that are immediately understood, despite their novelty, by those to whom they speak or write. They are never brought to the realization of how amazing an accomplishment this is, and of how limited is our comprehension of what makes it possible. Nor do they acquire any insight into the remarkable intricacy of the grammar that they use unconsciously, even insofar as this system is understood and can be explicitly presented. Consequently, they miss both the challenge and the accomplishments of the study of language.6

The central curricular problem in English language instruction might be formulated in this way: what study program can be developed to help the student become more proficient in creating and interpreting the sentences of his language? He already has a considerable understanding of the phonology and syntax at the intuitive level, and his lexicon has been steadily increasing. Does he need to study grammar in some formal way, then? If, as some claim, the five-year-old child possesses an already complete working knowledge of the grammar of his language, I think the answer is clearly “no.” On the other hand, if the performance of school children in the language tasks of writing, or of reading with understanding, betrays some unfamiliarity with the rich resources of the English sentence, then grammar might profitably be studied. It seems to me that in fact the linguistic performance of school children does reveal such unfamiliarity and that therefore a grammar—provided it be adequate—ought to be included in the English curriculum. It's conceivable, however, that the kind of grammar worthy of study in the secondary school is not yet available in sufficient detail for the thinly prepared teacher to risk using. The scientist cannot approach nature in an empty-headed way, with no theoretical frame to guide his question posing. Nor should the teacher of English approach the important study of language without a similar framework to guide him. But what do we ask of this new kind of grammar? As Fillmore puts it,

A grammatical description of a language is successful if it accounts for precisely the facility that an ideal speaker of a language has in producing and understanding the grammatical sentences in his language. The knowledge that the speaker brings to bear in exercising this ability may be separated into the general and the specific. One's general knowledge about a language is organized and displayed in its grammar; one's specific knowledge about the individual linguistic objects known as words or "lexemes" is collected and itemized in a dictionary or lexicon of the language.\(^7\)

The student may have the semantic information, for example, that the words averse and reluctant are synonymous; to use them appropriately, however, he must be aware of some additional, syntactic facts. Thus, although both can appear as predicates, only reluctant can appear attributively. We have

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\begin{align*}
(1) & \text{ the reluctant groom, but not} \\
(2) & \text{ *the averse groom.}
\end{align*}
\]

Moreover, in the predicate position, one can be used absolutely whereas the other cannot. We can say

\[
\begin{align*}
(3) & \text{ the groom was reluctant, but not} \\
(4) & \text{ *the groom was averse.}
\end{align*}
\]

Again, in the predicate positions, we find that there is a complementary distribution of permitted completers:

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\begin{align*}
(5) & \text{ ... reluctant to} & \text{ marry} & \text{ *marriage} & \text{ *marrying} & \text{ contrasted with} \\
(6) & \text{ ... averse to} & \text{ *marry} & \text{ marriage} & \text{ marrying}
\end{align*}
\]

It is readily apparent that to use and understand these two fairly simple adjectives, students need to know the meanings of the words as well as the conditions under which the words can appropriately be used.

Finally, it seems to me, the skepticism toward the new linguistics held by many so-called traditional teachers is being vindicated. They were, after all, always interested in meaning, and now semantics is one of the hottest topics in transformational generative theory. Linguists like Charles Fillmore, James D. McCawley, John R. Ross, George Lakoff, and D. T. Langendoen are exploring the topic with revolutionary enthusiasm. If the results of this research help develop an English transformational grammar that includes a semantic component, then all of us, English educators, teachers of English, and students of language, are the richer for it. The study of language can take up the puzzling and yet commonplace act by which sound and meaning are related.

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