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LANGUAGE STUDY: FUNDAMENTALLY HUMAN

James E. Davis

Since it is widely believed, not only by linguists but by geneticists as well, that language is the singular human trait that genetically marks us all, then it should not be so hard to make living language as interesting, rewarding, and dynamic as the study of literature or composition. Lewis Thomas, in *Lives of the Cell*, puts language-making in the category of nest building and hive-making—the one common, specific engagement of all humans. He says, “We engage in it communally, and automatically. We cannot be human without it; if we were to be separated from it our minds would die, as surely as bees lost from the hive” (105).

Our goal should be to help our students “do” language through reading, writing, and talking. If they are not allowed to engage in language articulation, then they usually show apathy and disinterest. “Correct grammar,” in the traditional sense, is not really our goal because language is changing all the time, and really, correct grammar in the logical (not fashionable) sense is, as Thomas says, “as much a biological characteristic of our species as feathers on a bird” (107). Fun with language involves exploring something living and growing, not finished and dead. Students get excited about “doing language.”

Language behaves like a living organism, changing itself as new words come into use and old ones fall into disuse. Sometimes meanings are changed; acceptable ways of putting words into sentences alter slowly over time as well as space. Even in the minds of our students, language is constantly being reinvented and reinterpreted. The interaction of our students through language redefines and reshapes our classrooms.

It must be obvious by now that I have found I need to relate the study of language to my own students’ language and language situations. How do I do this? In many, often playful ways, but all of the ways I use involve developing activities which integrate language with the overall process

virtually on a day-to-day basis. When students are having some grammar, mechanics, or usage problems in their writing, I take a few minutes of class time to discuss areas of weaknesses, whether they be punctuation, fragments, clauses, or overall sentence structures. The students at this moment of need are motivated to listen and participate in the activities because the language teaching here has direct application and importance to them. They realize that I am showing concern and offering my help so that their writing assignments will be better organized and prepared. They see language as a part of the regular classroom activities, not something over to the side and seriously painful.

Another way I emphasize living language is to have students clip out newspaper articles and remove all of the nouns, verbs, or adverbs, for example. Then they discuss, in speaking and writing, how this affected the article. This allows students to review the parts of speech and then practice on their own writing. I also have had students bring in newspaper articles when I discuss punctuation. Students can then cite examples of punctuation conventions from newspaper articles. Sometimes I have them cut the examples out and paste them on a sheet of paper, along with labels to identify their examples. This method gives my students a chance to see the rules in actual daily application. Of course, this also gets students to read newspapers, and sometimes they even get caught up in the everyday events of the community, state, nation, and even the world.

Having students work on phrase, clause, and sentence structures in a group-game setting is another way I have found useful. For instance, in groups of four or five, I often have one student start with a simple sentence. It is better if it is a good sentence, but any sentence will do, since the group can improve it as it goes along. The next student adds something on to the original sentence. It could be a modifier, phrase, clause, or whatever. A third student then adds something else to the sentence, and so on until everyone in the group has added to the original sentence. Students are, of course, practicing sentence combining, without necessarily being told that that is what they are doing. Sometimes they figure it out themselves. One important thing I always have these groups do is discuss whether the final sentence, always longer and more complex, is really an improvement over the original simple utterance. They quickly discover that it is impossible to make this judgment unless you have a context for the sentence and some idea of audience and purpose. So they are right back to writing—a good place to be.

Sometimes I give these groups a sentence in which I have shuffled the words around to a random order. They then work at solving the puzzle of what the best order should be, and this again gets them back to context, purpose, and audience. I always try to use sentences that could make sense with at least two word orders, preferably more. They find out that they already know a lot about word order, especially if they are native speakers of English. The variations on these inductive group activities are endless.

Among the many effective and interesting alternatives Stephen Judy (Tchudi) recommends in *Explorations in the Teaching of Secondary English* is one involving "Baby Talk," which I have used many times. I ask students who have younger siblings of from one to three years of age or who have access to children of that age to bring in some tape recordings of their speech. Sometimes not many of my students have access to children of this age, in which case I bring in the tapes myself. They do like it better, though, when they bring in the tapes, occasionally of their own children (or grandchildren). The students split into groups and try to discover the grammar regulation of the children's speech.

They recognize the patterns and movements of speech and discover that even small children can use the grammar of the language very effectively. Only after they have had a chance to discover questions for themselves do I give some general questions about the system that would best describe how the young children are learning language. Students regularly come up with such questions as: Are there predictable patterns that are followed in all children's language development? I give general questions like: Which seems to develop first, the use of nouns or verbs?

This "baby talk" activity can lead to many areas of grammar and usage, such as subject/predicate relationships (when does agreement develop?), sentence "sense" development, and the difference between grammar and usage. Each student tests each aspect of grammar and usage that comes up against the reality of the tape recordings of actual speech. As a culminating activity the entire class tries to develop a list of "safe" generalizations about the role imitation plays in language learning.

Frequently, I have also tried dialect study. One way to do this is to have the class prepare little dictionaries of each other's dialects. This is not easy, but with time the results are sometimes very positive. Students usually work in groups of two or three, later sharing their findings with the entire

class. They study each other's writing samples, interview, and listen in on conversations, taking careful notes. If time allows we take the "little dictionaries" and develop them into a sort of class linguistic atlas. My students develop more tolerance for dialect differences and usually develop a new, situational concept of "correctness."

Fictional languages offer another good way of approaching language study. By fictional languages I mean make-believe languages, usually constructed to complement a work of literature. Generally these are not based on a racial or national group. Examples of fictional languages include the very well known "Newspeak" of Orwell's *1984*, and, more recently, "Imperium" and "Fremen" of Frank Herbert. The public became so interested in Herbert's languages that he published a dictionary of them. Two-page terminology sheets were passed out at some theaters when *DUNE* was released to the big screens, and an explanation of important terms by one of the movie's characters introduced the film.

I have found that studying fictional languages such as those of Orwell and Herbert helps to motivate many students' thinking processes as they try to unravel their complexities and meanings. They learn much about their own language as they compare and contrast such things as tense, number, word order, and parts of speech in English with the fictional language.

An often neglected source for classroom study of language, and the one I use most frequently and consistently, is a good desk dictionary. What better text, really? It's brimming over with easy-to-find, alphabetical listings of words of the English language, giving archaic and obsolete labels, a precise pronunciation system, notes on usage, etymologies, idiomatic expressions, synonym and antonym listings, geographical entries, illustrations, and even a brief history of the English language. Most good desk dictionaries will show how English relates to other languages, at least with a family tree of languages. In addition, dictionaries often contain directories of institutions of higher education, communication signs and symbols, weights and measures, and even listings of masculine and feminine given names. I maintain the "play" spirit by having students work in groups and develop games for use in dictionary study. One good example is to use the dictionary to develop questions for a "Jeopardy" quiz.

Dictionaries probably should be our primary source, but first we have to teach our students how to use them and get them into the habit of doing

so. I generally find that my students use dictionaries very little. When this seems to be the case with a given class, I walk my class through the beginning and final pages, pointing out pronunciation and etymology keys and the guide to using whatever dictionary is being used. I prefer that several different texts are in the class. That way we can compare the way different dictionaries do things and help to get rid of the erroneous "The Dictionary" concept which many people have. Again they are liberated by seeing that dictionaries are made by people, not dictated from on high.

Next I like to guide the class through several entries, calling attention to pronunciation (and how it is shown), the figures of speech, numbered definitions (and what those numbers mean), and other forms or parts of speech the word in question may be used as. Game playing for repetition is much better than drill and practice. For example, sometimes I ask students to syllabify their names the way one dictionary might, or to pick out a word and act out its meaning, or to work in a group to act out various meanings, both denotative and connotative. I have some questions that can be used as games, sometimes timed, such as: "How does the Gregorian Calendar differ from the Julian?" or "What's the difference in the meaning of the word 'scale' as applied to zoology, botany, music, or physics?" or "How has a word, 'cute,' for example, changed since it first entered our language?"

Reading dictionary definitions well is not a passive activity. I teach students some steps to follow. For instance if they are trying to look up a word or phrase they don't understand in sentences like "The President moved a new proposal for savings and loan bailout" or "Hector kicked the bucket," multiple look-ups may be necessary. The phrase "kicked the bucket" might be listed under "bucket." They may have an item that is inflected, and looking it up may require removing the inflection. If one main entry can't be found for the unknown, I instruct students to do the following:

1. If the unknown is a compound word or a phrase (perhaps an idiom), try looking up each main element.
2. Try starting with the stem if the word has a prefix or suffix.
3. If the unknown seems to be an irregularly inflected form, try scanning nearby entries.

Although "skills" are a relatively small part of what I try to do in dictionary study, one skill I try to teach students is elimination. For example, if there are multiple entries for homographic entries, work out pronunciation and parts of speech. Scan all the definitions, and pick the one which seems to be nearest to possible meanings in the context. This is, of course, nearly impossible to do when a word is given out of context. Consequently, I give words in context.

Obviously I have offered only a few examples of ways of teaching language that can make it active and interesting. I try to take very seriously my own advice about connecting the study of language with writing and speaking. Probably the best way I know to make this connection (really an interconnection) is through studying ambiguity, because through that study we can come to a new realization of the "strangeness" of words and their capability of transmitting strangeness. Without that, how would we be able to recognize layers of meanings? Without ambiguity we would probably be, as Lewis Thomas says, "spending all our time sitting on stone fences, staring into the sun. To be sure, we would always have had some everyday use to make of the alphabet, and we would have reached the same capacity for small talk, but it is unlikely that we would have been able to evolve from words to Bach. The great thing about human language is that it prevents us from sticking to the matter at hand" (111-112). What could be more liberating?

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