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Marilyn Wilson

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LANGUAGE STORIES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Marilyn Wilson

*Language stories helped me understand the speech patterns and processes of language acquisition that are apparent in myself, my friends, and my family. They also make me **think** about how certain situations reflect those aspects of the English language which we discussed in class; that is, the things we talked about really **do** have a basis in the real world—and that's nice to know!...Language stories are everywhere—it's just a matter of paying attention to people.*

This comment is typical of the response I received from my college students at the end of spring term in a course dealing with language, its structure, acquisition, and variation. I had asked them to write a series of ten language stories, one each week, on a variety of topics related to course material. The stories were to be reflections of their own language in use or experiences with and observations of young children and adults in the process of learning, using, and experimenting with language. The stories could be reflections on issues or descriptions of experiences that would provide amusing, thought-provoking examples of how language is learned and used, how it is changing, and the impact it has on people's attitudes toward themselves and others. Students were encouraged to overhear conversations, become observers of their own use of language, and to begin making connections between real language in use and the more theoretical

issues we read about and discussed in class. The ten stories were replacing the traditional one and two lengthier papers often required in a course of this nature.

I had made this assignment partly for selfish reasons. I was tired of traditional papers, even though in the past many of the students had found interesting topics to investigate or had even found topics for original but informal research. Even then, however, their focus was on one major question, and I wanted them to begin thinking about real-life language issues—a wide range of them—as they made connections between course content and their own experiences.

I have also long been concerned in courses like this with the kinds of "learning" that were occurring; to put it into perspective, whether the learning was a matter of "knowledge reproduction" or of "knowledge transformation" (Jackson, 1986). Knowledge reproduction suggests that knowledge is transferred from teacher to learner, while knowledge transformation suggests the learner as more actively engaged in adapting and assimilating the subject matter to fit with prior understandings and experiences. College classes, in particular, often have the reputation of being too theoretical, too removed from the world "out there," taught by professors unwilling or unable to help students make connections to their own experiences. My belief is that language can be studied effectively only if students begin to make connections between the issues discussed in the course and their own experiences and observations. Knowledge transformation will occur only through this kind of personal engagement with the material.

My idea of language stories was borrowed from a similar activity recommended by an Indiana University professor, Carolyn Burke, who often used this activity in her graduate classes. I saw no reason why it wouldn't work with undergraduates equally well.

In the past, I had always encouraged students to share these ideas and connections through class discussion, but a part of me strongly felt that asking students to write about their experiences would encourage them to take the assignment more seriously and to participate more fully. Too often in class discussions, contributions from students are relatively limited in number. This was also an ideal way to encourage the concept of "learning by writing," on the assumption that writing about these issues as they relate to personal experiences and observations may help students assimilate concepts and solidify their own thinking. In fact, one of the student responses to the assignment at the close of the term said: "For me, the important key is this: When we have been exposed to new ideas about language, thoughts and ideas come into our heads, but they soon pass, having little effect on us. However, when you have a thought or new perspective on something and you write it down, it somehow becomes a part of you."

When I first made the assignment, a number seemed interested, but many expressed concern about not knowing what to write about. Ten?? Are there really ten things that any of us could say about our observations of language? Maybe five, but surely not ten. But I insisted, and the daily consciousness of language that the assignment revealed produced a

greater breadth of topics than we could ever have covered in class discussion.

Topics on language acquisition ranged from personal examples of learning one's native language, to observations about stages of acquisition they had observed in younger siblings or children of friends. In some instances parents came to a new understanding of their role in the language learning of their own children. One student, in particular, based a story on his own experiences as a parent who assumed correcting children's language was how they acquired it more efficiently:

I certainly hate to admit it, but the text has shown me that I have been an over-corrective parent. However, in the last two months I have been too busy to correct my four-year-old's language usage. Prior to this time he had avoided having any lengthy conversation with me. But now that I haven't been correcting him, I can't get him to shut up. Once that bubble of suppression was lifted he apparently has felt more comfortable in speaking and I have noticed an increase in usage, experimentation, and self correcting because I haven't had the time to talk down to him or talk up to him, so to speak.

Another parent reported on trying to correct his son's over-generalization of the regular past tense:

"Daddy, I goed to the zoo with Mumma today."
"You went to the zoo today?"
"No Daddy, I goeded to the zoo."
"No Lynden, you went to the zoo."
"Nooo Daddy, I goooeded to the zoo."
"No Lynden, you goed to the zoo." Needless to say, I dropped the English lesson.

Some stories involved the problems—some humorous and some not—in learning to function in a second language. One young man, for

example, wrote about his experiences speaking German when he worked for Ford Motor Company in West Germany. At one point, using what he knew about German prefixes and root words, he asked his co-worker, much to his co-worker's amusement, to untie a package by asking him to "cut the umbilical cord." Still another student wrote about her friend who thought how coincidental it was that both his grandmother and the grandmother of his fiancé were named Oma, until he was informed that Oma is the German word for grandmother.

Several students commented on their growing awareness of socio-cultural language differences and their impact on language issues in the classroom; their stories demonstrated increasing awareness that social class dialects do not reflect limited linguistic capabilities. One woman wrote about how her perceptions of her husband's lower-middle class dialect were altered after reading about dialect variation:

What I think I have discovered after class discussion on dialects is that John has been exposed to many different dialects of English and therefore has a trained ear when it comes to understanding them. Because of my limited exposure I am much less flexible. I have come to realize that John is much more adept at language skill than I thought.

As a relatively new topic for many students, pragmatics evoked a number of comments. Some students commented on miscommunications occurring from speaker's pragmatic intentions being either misunderstood or ignored. One woman commented on her husband's disguised command not to spend any money when he says to her: "There's no extra money in the checkbook." He's making more than a statement in this statement, she says. Another student was momentarily thrown off-guard by a stranger's

question, "Are you wearing a watch?" which he found out to be a request for the time. Other stories included parental frustration over children deliberately ignoring commands by choosing to interpret parents' questions literally: "Is that your coat on the floor?" for most parents is not simply a question. Others commented on new word coinages creeping into the language; family terms often misunderstood by outsiders, not unlike more general uses of slang for the purpose of inclusion and exclusion; and the short life of slang terms, as expressed by one student: "One rule of slang is omnipresent, though; don't let dust grow on it. If it's been said, it's already dead." Others commented on the elevation or denigration of word meanings and on the widening and narrowing of word meanings over time. One wrote about examples of double-speak, euphemisms, and language used to disguise reality: "response to impact" as the Army report description of bodies and body parts that had been cast up into the jungle trees by an incoming mortar round. Still another student wrote about the jargon of pipe-fitters, specifically one crew who referred to the largest wrench as "Joan," named after the wife of the boss because, "that's the wrench that has the biggest mouth," a comment which resulted in an immediate discussion of sexist language, of course!

Our discussion of the relationship between language and thought prompted one student to comment on a linguistic problem in psychotherapy:

The structure of the English **be** verb system inherently encourages certain ways of thinking about the relationship between an individual and the individual's behavior. For example, in the sentence "John is angry," it is habitual to identify John with his behavior, a situation considered to be

non-therapeutic. One of the techniques of the rational emotive therapist is borrowed from a linguist by the name of Korzybski who has done research on what he terms "E-prime," a way of speaking that attempts to eliminate the use of the verb "to be" when it is used to describe behavior.

He concluded his story by commenting about the difficulty of dealing with this fascinating linguistic problem in modern psychotherapy.

One of the hottest issues was that of the relationship between gender and language. One student commented:

The discussion on male and female uses of language included a discussion of tag questions as they are perceived by some to be an indicator of more feminine speech. I see a problem with that. I spent five years in the Army and I heard many men use tag questions, and they weren't using them in a so-called feminine context. For example, I remember my drill sergeant using many tag questions such as "This damned Army's all right, isn't it?" and you had better either say yes or say nothing at all. Another example is that as we were crawling on our bellies through mud and water, he'd say, "You're having fun, aren't you?" and "You love this stuff, don't you?" These kinds of examples make me question the validity of using feature analysis as an indicator of the female register. There was nothing feminine about the way my drill sergeant used tag questions.

Each week after I had read them, commented on them, and given them back, I would ask a few students to share their stories with the rest of the class. And often they would share them spontaneously when class discussion focused on an issue about which they had recently written. I had rarely seen such active involvement in language observation. One student commented: "Now I have a hard time **not** trying to overhear conversations because I've been so focused on listening to how people talk

to one another, and my friends are getting a little tired of me always talking about language."

My impressions of their success are that the students wrote, they thought, they made connections, they took delight in reminiscing about language and in observing and participating in language. In fact, one student commented:

I am planning on becoming an English teacher. I must say that I will be tempted to give an assignment of this sort to my students. I feel that they would get a lot out of the assignment, as I did, and also learn to be more aware of language and the way it is used by different people in different situations.

Another comment perhaps sums them up:

These language stories are good because they require application and synthesis of the course concepts. Paraphrasing the experts in order to crank out a term paper is really a lower level skill than writing an original language story. Language stories allowed me to keep thinking about course topics long after my responsibility to do so had expired, i.e. after the test was finished.

I have no proof that my students "learned" more from this experience than they would have writing more traditional papers, but if their reflections and comments mean anything, they will probably remember some of the issues discussed in the course, particularly those they wrote about, long after the course is over. Knowledge transformation may not have occurred for all students, but course material was more likely assimilated by many because they were making the kinds of connections that make knowledge transformation possible.

NOTE

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Marilyn Wilson is an Assistant Professor of English at Michigan State University.