

Teaching

on

the

Edge

of

Discovery

by
G. Robert Carlsen

HELPING the young gain facility in the use of their native language has been the subject of constant controversy since Ben Franklin originally proposed the idea for his academy for the worker-citizen of the new democracy. For generations teachers have secretly if not overtly believed that grammatical knowledge would provide the tool through which the individual could make decisions about innumerable problems of language that faced him in daily life.

Investigations during the first half of the twentieth century increasingly demonstrated that knowledge of grammar did not function in the ways claimed for it. Educators came to feel that language use was a matter primarily of habit formation and was best taught through the techniques suggested by the psychologist rather than the grammarian. Schools moved, on the one hand, to endless drills in usage, capitalization, and punctuation, with workbooks the principal instructional device. On the other hand, some schools instigated programs centered in practice in language activities such as telephoning, letter writing, discussion, conversation and reporting.

By the middle of the century, it became increasingly apparent that teachers desperately needed a more adequate knowledge of the English language and of the process of communication. Instincts, feelings, folk beliefs, even superstition have too often been the basis for designing instructional programs. Yet surprisingly many of the things that individual teachers have devised simply from the inventiveness of desperation have proved to have validity.

By the mid-twentieth century massive investigations by linguists and communication experts began to supply revolutionary insights into the nature of lan-

guage and its operations. By applying the scientific methods to the study of language, linguists collected samples of language as it actually existed and attempted to describe objectively what happened instead of following the older schools of thought which simply set up formulas for what language "ought to be."

While contemporary investigators disagree profoundly with one another about the best way to describe the phenomena of language, they agree that description is a better method of approach than prescription. They are also in fundamental agreement that the grammatical description of English as taught in the schools for the past 200 years is unsound. The grammar of the past and the grammar of most schools today is referred to as Latin Grammar. This grammar evolved during the eighteenth century when Latin was felt to contain the common elements underlying all languages. Hence the body of Latin grammar was imposed on the English language. Where the two did not fit, grammarians attempted to reform the language rather than reforming the grammar. In a real sense, the investigations of the modern linguists are formulating the first real grammar of the English language. Obviously, the process is a long and time-consuming one. At present, several systems have been formulated, but the points of difference are so extreme that most school systems are not willing to introduce the systems. A number of schools have experimented with the system developed by Charles Fries and refined in text form by Paul Roberts but the results are not clear cut.

A basic contention of the contemporary linguist is that language is understood through its structural clues and patterns rather than through the mean-

ing units of Latin grammar. A noun is a kind of word that will fit into certain patterns in a unit of language rather than the name of a person, place or thing. The new grammars attempt to describe the multitudinous though not infinite structural patterns that habitually make up the language. Therefore it seems to follow that learning to control the structural patterns of language is perhaps of greater importance than learning the vocabulary of the language itself.

New Approaches

The ferment in thinking and pronouncements leaves teachers in a confusing position. Yet at the present time at least the following proposals seem both sound and practical.

1. *The introduction of units of study about the nature of language itself:* Surprisingly, in the long search for a content to teach, English teachers have overlooked almost completely a vast body of information about language that can be interesting to students and important for educated people to know. One school sets up the following units of study at each grade level:

Seventh Grade: "Investigation of the Various Ways Men Communicate with One Another." Students examine their communities to tabulate the kinds of communicating signals that are used apart from language. As individual projects, they investigate such means of communication as Braille, the musical notation system, the Morse code, the symbols used by pilots on planes, Indian smoke signals, and the manual alphabets of deaf-mutes.

G. Robert Carlsen is Professor of English and Education, University of Iowa, Iowa City, and is President of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Eighth Grade: "The History of Language." Here students learn about the various theories of the origin of language, the ways in which languages spread and grow, the major language families and their subdivisions, and the history of the English language.

Ninth Grade: "The Sociology of Language." Students investigate the variations that occur in the English language because of geographic, vocational and socioeconomic differences. They make collections not only of the usage they hear, but of the usage of characters in regional literature. This material makes a fascinating study and provides the soundest possible base for later attempts to change substandard usage.

Tenth Grade: "Semantic Principles." Students look at some of the kinds of blockages that occur in the communication process and the ways that language operates in human relationships.

Eleventh Grade: "The Patterning of the English Sentence." Students spend time examining directly the patterns of English sentences. From this examination they learn how elements may be positioned.

The preceding units are taught as subject matter content quite apart from attempts in other parts of the program to bring about changes in the language habits of students. They center on language as a human phenomenon. The hope is that students by such a study will come to a respect for and a curiosity about language that may bring insight and a sense of significance into their own struggles to control language.

2. *A planned relationship between oral and written expression:* The linguists generally feel that the basic form of language is oral. Their studies of language have been made of the oral forms.

They point out that the sound system of the language, the phonemes, is the most consistent element in it. The oral devices of pitch, stress and juncture are the basic signals of meaning. In the English language, the written form has some differences from the oral form, but it is basically an imitation of the oral patterns. Punctuation is a means of indicating in writing some of the same signals that pitch, stress and juncture signal in conversation. Educational studies for years have indicated that oral drill on language forms and usage are almost twice as effective in changing language habits as written drill.

Thus while schools in general are placing a renewed emphasis on the teaching of composition, it seems apparent that improvement in writing can be best accomplished by increased practice in the control of oral forms of language. New emphasis must be placed on the relationships between the two activities. Thus students need systematic oral discussion of what they are going to put in writing before they attempt to write. As they mature, they need some conscious knowledge of their voice patterns in indicating the sentence unit or in marking units of meaning. Ultimately they need to develop the sensitivity that helps them test what they write against the ingrained oral patterns.

3. *Breaking the process of composition into finer steps for presentation:* At present the learner is thrown into a whole complicated mass of problems when he is asked to write a theme. We expect him to take part in a highly skilled race before he has learned to walk. In writing a theme he is forced to handle a complicated undertaking made up of many individual steps when logically he should first have been

helped to handle each of the steps singly. Teachers sensing this absurdity have, to be sure, often tried to limit the problem by asking students to write a single paragraph. Yet in essence the construction of a single paragraph involves all the complications of a longer piece of writing. Composition obviously involves two basic components: the writing of a single sentence and the combining of one sentence with another to make a pattern of progressive meanings. Each of these processes is subject to increasing complications as the child's thoughts mature. Hence the student needs help in writing more and more complicated sentences and needs help in developing more and more subtle, sequential thought. Each of these processes is subject to carefully designed drills which lead the student to gain control over these basic elements a step at a time. The situation is comparable to the two approaches in dance instruction. In the one, an individual is shown the whole intricate pattern of steps that make up a certain dance and must imitate the whole at once. In the other, he is taught the individual steps singly and when he has mastered these, he is then shown how to put them together in the dance pattern.

4. *The presentation of grammatical concepts:* For some time to come, perhaps forever, teachers will find it necessary to use certain technical terms in talking with students about their language performance. Most teachers trained today would find it impossible to find a way around using words like noun, verb, pronoun, modifier, adverb, adjective, phrase, and clause as terms to designate the parts of the English sentence. The present ferment among linguists suggests the following point of

view in developing these concepts with young people. The teacher should avoid using any kind of rigid definition. Instead he should use the inductive approach in which students examine a series of sentences with a common structural element underlined in each group. The class is then asked to try and figure out what the underlined elements have in common.

Another technique is to give students a sentence in which a blank is left for a noun. They are asked to think of as many words as they can that would fit in the blank. Then the teacher explains that such a word is called a noun. Many of the so-called games or "rule of thumb" techniques that teachers have discovered for themselves are more consistent with present linguistic thinking than are the time honored approaches of the grammar textbooks.

The basic suggestion is made that students develop a feeling for a particular structure largely through the process of osmosis, by having many opportunities to play with it, by focusing attention on its use rather than defining and categorizing. No definition of a structural element is as yet rigorous enough to be helpful to the student, particularly the one who does not automatically grasp the concept lying somewhat behind and beyond what the teacher or the book is really saying.

Most of all, it is obvious that the English teacher of today must develop a new interest and curiosity about the developments in his field. The person trained as recently as five years ago does not have the factual information necessary to grasp the rapidly developing understandings about language necessary to teach in today's classroom. The alert teacher must strive, as never before, to teach on the edge of discovery.

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