MAN uses language to inquire, to expose, to persuade and to evoke. In school, language is at once a means of educating and a subject for education. When a child manipulates school language well, he succeeds; when he does not, he fails.

The child is expected to learn the sounds of the language, the word structures, the sentence structures, the paragraph structures, and the meaning of the words. He learns to encode, he learns to decode. In short, he learns to use the language fluently and to exhibit an unspecified degree of control and effectiveness when using it.

The desired end of this process is improved communication—more perfect association between the child and his world. Yet it would seem that language is being used in the schools to dissociate the child from himself, from others, from the world, and certainly from the institution which hopes to help him cope with his world and improve upon it.

Educators, linguists, literary critics, psychologists, communications specialists, and media specialists have described the alienating forces of language without apparently being able to eliminate these forces. Teachers have agreed, generally, with all of the profound theories of language use, but, lacking the opportunity to examine their own classroom language, have been unable to modify it.

Among the many classroom uses of language that alienate the child are four that bear repeated examination: the amount of language used in the classroom, the kind of language demanded from the child, the inappropriate use of language in instruction, and the inconsistency between language theory and school practice.

The Amount of Language

McLuhan (1964, p. 35) stated, in his treatise on the medium as the message, that a society which bases its economy on a few major staples creates extreme instability in the economy. Similarly, schools which use one major device, language, for learning are creating unstable learning. Or as McLuhan more succinctly put it, society "pays through the nose and all its other senses for each staple that shapes its life."

It is well noted that language is the pervading instructional device used in
school. Of the talking that goes on, seventy percent is teacher talk. That leaves, barring child differences, approximately one percent for each child. Even without appropriate empirical evidence, this situation is hardly conducive to the development of the child's cognitive abilities. Communication as a human process occurs between people. It must operate both ways or it (and possibly the institution which fosters it) will become obsolete. If the teachers and the books do all the inquiring, exposing, persuading and evoking, what is left for the child? The child who constantly has to decode, but who rarely has to encode, is ill prepared to communicate.

Culkin (1966, p. 8) suggested that "the electronic media have broken the monopoly of print; they have altered our sensory profiles by heightening our awareness of aural, tactile, and kinetic values." He easily might have used "words" for "print." If the word monopoly is broken in general, then it needs to be broken in the school too. If the teacher is to help the child learn, emphasis must be taken off teacher language and instructional language and placed on child language and on other approaches to learning, be they involved with real life experience or the more vicarious experiences typical of the classroom. Conversation, confrontation, physical models, literary experiences are now more necessary than lectures and question-drill techniques.

The Language Demanded from Children

Hentoff (1966) suggested that alienation might not be the lot of future generations if schools were not a lock-step of accelerating pressures to be "right." To be right in school one must have all the proper values and must trot them out every time he speaks or writes. Several school "right" practices which induce alienation have been listed by Hickerson (1966). Among them are two particularly germane to this article: the child must use decent language and he must employ grammatically correct language.

Obtaining control of meaning and mastering language forms is part of the child's job in school. However, the means taken by teachers to help children acquire this mastery and control seem contrary to what is known both about language and about children. Both of the above prescriptions are based on the assumption that one dialect communicates better than others. Some children are astute enough or maybe angry enough to play the game according to the school's rules. They know the school's dialect. They know that there is a school language and their own language. They use one in school; the other outside of school. However, not all children know the rules of this game, nor are all children who do know them able to carry them out.

If the desire is to use the language, to communicate, then other considerations ought to be subordinate to this end. The child has a workable language with a workable grammar when he comes to school. He ought to be given the opportunity to see and hear how his own language works. He ought to be able to compose his own thoughts and his own feelings in his own language regardless of the prescriptive bonds of "nice," "correct" language. Since any one dialect in this country is correct
only through historical accident, and since the subject matter of one's oral and written school discourse ought to come from one's own experience, there is no real reason for insisting upon a child's using a language.

When the teacher's dialect and the child's dialect are grossly different, the imposition of the standard dialect can confuse the child. When they are not divergent, such insistence may only make him a master of deceit. Language is a changing, living thing. It is learned through using it to understand one's own world. The child who is forced to talk or write a language which holds no human value for him in his world becomes uncommunicative.

The child can learn the language appropriate to the situation by reading it, hearing it, and through his natural adaptive processes when appropriate models are available. As he learns it, he can be led first to generalize from his language about the rules that make it work, and only then should he be confronted with the appropriate usages that govern dialect differences.

**The Language of Instruction**

When Korzybski and others pioneered the science of meaning in the United States, they gave the social scientists better tools than had been previously available to describe the world and its peoples. The schools have profited from this language precision in better texts, in more precise knowledge of teacher behavior and so on. Yet even with this precision, little could be done to control the meanings of the everyday words used in the classroom.

Fersh (1963, p. 259) has stated that, "Dictionaries carry definitions but people carry connotations—and it is connotations which rule thinking and influence behavior." Connotations in the instructional use of language need close examination if the child is not to be driven away from school learning. For example, the following statement not only upholds one of the greatest myths in the schools, but also confuses the treatment of fact and opinion. "I'm putting it to a 'B' this time. You need to have something to make you wake up and realize that this work has to be done." Within these two sentences the teacher has told the child what his needs are and has lowered the grade to prove it. The statement is understandable but completely unrealistic.

Such language tends to conceal the actual values in education. Not only are the evaluations of children hidden under "microwords" called grades, but even the recommendations tend to push the child away. For instance, "Well, your spelling is very good in that letter. Did someone help you with it?" Teachers undoubtedly make such statements unconsciously, so much so that one is utterly frustrated in trying to help them avoid such comments. Schools of journalism sometimes use a book called *Say It Safely, Legal Limits in Publishing, Radio, and Television* (Ashley, 1966). Perhaps what is needed in the classroom is a volume that might be entitled "Say It Safely, Psychological Limits in Teaching."

**Inconsistency of Language Theory and School Practice**

A basic inconsistency exists in the approach to the study of language in the schools. For example, the child is told to create, to imagine, and then is
told, “I think we should be careful of what we write. You know, I wouldn’t say I did those things because if something happens then they’ll think, well, now Danny had something like that in a paper.”

The pronouns are italicized because they carry the statement. The “we’s” are society as incorporated in the teacher, the “I’s” are the teacher as a conforming member of society. If the child is refused the right to imagine, to be creative, then of course “Newspeak” will have taken over even earlier than predicted. If there were no need to imagine, “reading and writing” could be taught in the science class.

When the imagination is permitted to work, the child can then begin to work with values whether he is writing about junkies or about bras. (These two subjects, written about by an 11- and a 12-year-old respectively, drew censure.) Children will write even when they know that gall is their reward. But they will not be able to write well in school. Often, paradoxically, even when the child wants to communicate, he is silenced. The child’s environmental contacts are broadened outside of the classroom, and then he is forced to deny the existence of these experiences when he is in the classroom.

This kind of inconsistency is more serious in the schools than ever before. Hertzler (1965) and Deutsch (1965) have both postulated about the language of alienated youth. Their work suggests that the heightened environmental stimulation of the modern world and the broader prospects for education now available for those alienated from
society can only increase their communication problems with their society and consequently with the society's schools. Those who are alienated become more readily aware of the ingroup's thoughts, feelings and actions. Each group learns the other's advantages and weaknesses.

Schools have the greatest capacity for making communication work for the alienated child, but they likewise can cause the greatest harm. They are working against both age and culture. In Culkin's terms (1966), it is nuclear students in linear schools. In this writer's terms, children who are discovering the world, are locked in the classroom with words that do not help them understand what they are discovering.

In summary, this paper has attempted to provoke some thought about the effects of language upon children in school. Many of the problems discussed are not immediately solvable, yet much can be done to improve the situation if only teachers would listen to themselves or, if the opportunity exists, could read transcripts of what they say. Much too can be accomplished when the child is permitted to talk more without the totally unnecessary overemphasis upon making his speech patterns conform. Innis (1951, p. 191) suggests, "that the oral dialectic is overwhelmingly significant where the subject matter is human action and feeling . . . ."

Attention must be given to saying things safely, not to keep the teacher out of trouble, but to enable him to maintain his privileged position for interacting with the child. So often the child is "turned off" rather than "on" by the language teachers use and the language they ask him to use. "Turning him on" can only be accomplished by providing the child with opportunity to use his language to understand his world. His world is the same as the teacher's, but he must interact with it on his own.

References


