



The Teaching of Language as School Subject: Theoretical Influences

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Abstract

Language as school subject, perhaps more than any area of the curriculum, has created different traditions and orientations. These have been influenced by theoretical perspectives drawn from a number of disciplines such as psychology, linguistics and philosophy. A Framework for Language Education would address (both in the document itself and in supporting papers) some of the key thinking that has influenced pedagogical practice in the teaching of language as school subject and would help users of the Framework to evaluate their own approach in relation to different theoretical perspectives.

Introduction

The study of language is such a broad subject that the theoretical perspectives are considerable and varied: psychology, linguistics, philosophy and many other disciplines have much to contribute about the nature of language and the way it functions in society. If literature is included as a component of languages of education the range of theoretical influences becomes even wider, embracing in addition literary and cultural theory. A Framework for Language Education would address (both in the document itself and in supporting papers) some of the key thinking that has influenced pedagogical practice in the teaching of language as school subject (LS). The field has changed considerably in recent decades and A Framework for Language Education would bring together concepts, theory and research that have guided practice in order to help users reflect on the development of their own policies and approaches. Language as school subject, perhaps more than any area of the curriculum, has created competing traditions and orientations; these need to be mapped out and the different positions explored in relation to the relevant theory background.

Different theoretical disciplines are relevant to thinking about language. It may therefore be helpful not to think in terms of a theory of language but to consider that different theoretical insights from different perspectives can inform and complement each other. In each case it is important to examine how different perspectives either have influenced practice in the classroom directly or else are implicit in particular pedagogic practices. Concepts from the different disciplines often overlap and are inter-related. 'Language in use' for example is a phrase which has resonance in psychological perspectives on language acquisition (related, for example, to the

primary way in which language is thought to develop), philosophy (referring to the view that language has meaning in cultural contexts) and linguistics (embodying a change from a stress on form or structure to language in use in social contexts). In each case, the phrase 'language in use' has a slightly different nuance in the context of each discipline which can cause misunderstanding. Just as communicating *with* language can be difficult, communicating *about* language is not always straightforward and may be subject to confusion.

1. Language and meaning

A common starting point for talking about language is to refer to the different functions it serves not just to communicate ideas but to express emotion, develop understanding, cement social interaction and so on. Identifying the various functions of language highlights the fundamental importance of language in human civilisation and quite rightly acknowledges its power. However it is also useful, particularly in the context of languages of education, to draw attention to ideas about the limitations of language which may be derived from a consideration of the way language has meaning. A common sense view suggests that language has meaning because it relates to the reality to which it refers in a direct way. When someone says 'pass the salt' and the salt gets passed at the table this suggests a simple relationship between the word 'salt' and the object itself. However a moment's reflection reveals that this is not true of less concrete terms such as 'intelligence', 'education', 'language' or 'literature' (and many philosophers would argue that this account of meaning is not true of any type of language). A word like 'intelligence' gets its meaning from its use in cultural contexts through tacit negotiation. Its meaning therefore is not fixed and determined (for example many educators now argue that there is not one intelligence but several types of intelligence). This in turn highlights the way use of language can serve to constrain thinking without users necessarily being aware of this fact. For example, the use of the generic term 'language' itself may disguise differences between writing and speaking. It is often claimed that language acquisition is a natural process but this may be only true of speaking because it could be argued that writing requires more formal instruction and does not develop naturally (a similar argument could be applied to examples of formal speaking). Likewise, it may be misleading to say of someone that they are competent in using language in a general sense without distinguishing between speaking, reading and writing.

Some theorists argue that to claim that language is acquired naturally is to deny the way language has meaning in cultural contexts. Others retort that this is not what was meant by the term 'natural' in that context. Differences in opinion often centre on uses of terms; the different intentions of speakers means that communication is sometimes difficult. Attempting to communicate with another person in any context other than the highly trivial is not necessarily straightforward because people view the world from their own perspectives. Language users who take the view that the meaning of language is fundamentally clear and transparent may attribute difficulties to lack of clarity or obtuseness on the part of the listener. The view therefore that meaning is derived through tacit negotiation in social contexts has important pedagogical implications. It suggests that ambiguity and uncertainty should not be seen as strange, aberrant uses of language but are fundamental to the nature of language. On this view literature (where ambiguity is often celebrated) far from being an optional extra is central to a language curriculum because it explicitly addresses nuances and subtleties of language. This view of meaning also has implications for both the nature and importance of listening. Listening is not just a simple matter of decoding and understanding surface content but it means being sensitive to context, to non-verbal behaviour, to intention and perhaps above all to the potential for misunderstanding.

The type of intercultural sensitivity and ability to decentre required to understand a foreign language is also relevant to understanding all language, more so than is often thought. This is a further argument for a holistic view and the value of seeing foreign language acquisition and language as school subject (LS) in relation to each other.

The idea that meaning arises through use, through agreements in culture or 'forms of life' and not just by attaching names to objects or phenomena in the world has been influential in much modern thinking about language. The idea that language has meaning in a 'form of life' is in total contrast to the idea of language simply as a system of signs. It emphasises instead that language is embedded in the significant behaviour (including non-linguistic behaviour) of human beings. That does not mean that grammatical structures are not important – but the bedrock of meaning is in its use. On this view the starting point for teachers in the classroom must then be use of language, with technical terminology and study of the conventions of language playing a supportive rather than dominant role.

2. Language and learning

The insight that language has functions beyond communication, particularly that use of language is intricately related to the development of thought, has had important consequences for teaching. Theorists have differed on the precise relationship between language and thinking and in the past have perhaps overemphasised the degree to which language actually determines thought. It is perhaps more accurate to see language and thought as interdependent rather than to assert that they are identical or to try to say whether one determines the other but acknowledgement of the way they are intricately connected has underpinned important pedagogical considerations. Realisation of the nature of the relationship between language and learning meant that more stress was placed on the use of exploratory talk in the classroom in order to allow the expression and development of concepts. It is through language that learners can bring to explicit awareness what formerly they only had a sense of. If language use is seen as a primary means of learning, the learner needs to be seen as an active participant, using language to explore, develop and refine concepts not just to communicate them. This of course is true within all subjects of the curriculum and provides a theoretical foundation for the concept of language across the curriculum (see separate paper). If, in contrast, language is considered solely as a system of communication this tends to relegate the learner to a mere passive role as a receiver of knowledge.

Language also has a key role in personal development, in exploring and defining responses and feelings. This leads to the view that one key aim of language as school subject is the personal growth of the learner. This approach has often been related to what is referred to as the more creative or expressive uses of language e.g. writing stories, poems, personal reminiscences often in response to literature. The different aims of language as school subject can lead to unhelpful polarisation, with advocates of a personal growth view opposed by those who see the primary aim of language as school subject the development of functional literacy so that the learner can meet the demands of adult society. These polarised views can be avoided to some degree by placing theoretical perspectives on language at the fore; language is inextricably connected with the growth of learning of all kinds and this needs to be acknowledged in the way language as school subject is conceived.

3. Language acquisition and development

There is a considerable literature dealing with how children acquire language in the process of cognitive development, much of it emphasising the importance of active use of language. In other words the child acquires vocabulary and rules of language within situations in which language is used. Psychological perspectives on language acquisition therefore relate to philosophical ideas about language and meaning in that both stress the importance of social and cultural contexts. A central idea which has had a significant effect on the teaching of language as school subject is that language develops by its active use in meaningful contexts rather than just by narrow instruction in skills. This does not mean however that there is an easy consensus on the precise balance between the two. Some critics have taken the view that 'language in use' approach can be taken to extremes. A traditional error in teaching language as school subject was to concentrate on decontextualised grammar exercises and skills at the expense of meaning; but to many critics it was equally mistaken to concentrate exclusively on the use of language without taking opportunities to focus on language itself. A Framework for Language Education would have a role in laying out the different positions and suggesting how in practice they can be integrated in order to inform practice.

Changing perspectives in linguistics also had a significant influence on thinking about the teaching of language. The fact that language is a rule-governed system can lead to a prescriptive view of language which seeks to lay down the rules of 'correct' usage and asserts that one type of language is superior to another. The move to more descriptive approaches aimed not to evaluate different uses of language but instead to describe them, to say how people actually do speak not how they should speak. The dismissal of prescriptivism is a standard theme in books both in linguistics and language teaching but the polarisation between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' approaches does not necessarily resolve all the issues for the teacher of language as school subject. Abandonment of notions of 'right' and 'wrong', 'correct' and 'incorrect' which do not sit comfortably within a descriptive approach to language can leave the teacher feeling rootless and directionless in terms of actual classroom practice where common sense suggests that notions of 'accuracy' in language use still has relevance.

One approach has been to stress the idea of 'appropriate' rather than 'correct' uses of language. This is the view, for example, that the language used in informal situations is not necessarily the appropriate language to use when attending a job interview (notions of access and social mobility are inevitable aspects of developing a policy on language teaching). Another approach is to make more of the difference between speaking and writing often, as suggested, disguised in the use of the generic term 'language'. Some writers would argue that notions of accuracy are more appropriate for writing than for speaking and that tolerance of a wide variety of spoken types of language in the classroom does not mean abandoning rules for correct uses of written language. A third approach is to widen the notion of what 'knowledge about language entails'. The prescriptive/descriptive polarisation tends to focus on language forms but knowledge about language as part of a school syllabus can also be extended to embrace language change (the fact that language has changed through history and is not static but constantly embraces new words and usages) and language variety (including different dialects, ways that language is used in society, how language is affected by social contexts). Such explicit knowledge about language if relevant at all to the teaching of language as school subject was traditionally thought to be province of the teacher but there is an argument that a broad understanding and knowledge about language should be part of the language as school subject syllabus.

4. Literary theory

Developments in theory have influenced approaches to the teaching of literature. These can, in part, be conceptualised in terms of the different emphasis placed on the author, text or reader in explaining how texts can be said to have meaning. A traditional view was to assume that the meaning of the text was exactly equivalent to that intended by the author. The role therefore of the teacher was to help learners come to understand the 'correct' meaning of the work and this might take place through inductive question and answer sessions. In this approach it was not uncommon to begin a study of text with background notes on the life and times of the author. In contrast formalist, structuralist and new critical approaches placed more emphasis on the text itself and denied the relevance of the author's intentions to the meaning of the text. Alongside this view was a diminution of the relevance of the wider contextual knowledge of the life and times of the author. The approach in the classroom was more focused on practical criticism but there was still a tacit acceptance that the teacher's job was to lead the pupils to the 'correct' meaning. The influence of reader-response theories moved the teaching of literature in a different direction. Here much greater emphasis is placed on the ability of the reader to respond imaginatively to texts. Reader-response theories emphasise the importance of the contribution which the reader makes to the meaning of texts. One of the key challenges facing teachers of literature is to work out in practice how to engage pupils in reading texts and elicit their personal responses without at the same time subscribing to forms of relativism, for there is an argument to suggest that it is the teacher's responsibility to help learners distinguish what is good from what is mediocre.

The questions of standards of literary judgement leads to contrasting views of the appropriateness of a canon. A traditional 'cultural heritage' view of teaching literature implies the formulation of a canon of key texts with an emphasis on respect and appreciation rather than critical engagement. However the notion of a canon has been challenged by some theorists who have also questioned the concept of literature as a discrete category. Aspects of critical theory promote an examination of text and categories of text in a wider cultural context, questioning the exclusive category of 'literature'. Some writers have argued that literature does not have a clear identity'. Categories exist in a network of overlapping relationships and are not always easily separated: literary and philosophical texts are not always distinct from each other; some letters and essays count as literature. The term 'literature' traditionally refers to novels, plays and poetry but increasingly media texts are being included in the language classroom as worthy objects of study.

5. Theory and pedagogy

There is unlikely to be a simple causal relationship between theory (including the results of empirical research) and practice in the classroom or the formation of policy. Many questions about the teaching of language as school subject are inextricably tied with questions of value and priorities. It is important, however, to have some understanding of the different debates (some of which have been addressed briefly in this paper) and how theoretical perspectives have influenced them to ensure that thinking is broadened and judgements are appropriately informed.

There is no one correct way of describing general approaches to the teaching of language as school subject. Broad summaries will inevitably oversimplify but may be useful in identifying patterns of practice. What might be termed a 'progressive' approach recognised the importance of emotion and subjectivity in learning but to some critics erred in its overemphasis on undisciplined self expression. More

traditional approaches which identified the importance of tradition, criticism and the public element in learning could be said to have placed insufficient emphasis on the importance of subjectivity and creativity. Approaches to the teaching of language as school subject which have been highly influenced by socio-linguistics recognised the importance of the active use of language and of allowing pupils to formulate their own responses but have been criticised for reducing the content of lessons to a form of social studies and neglecting the aesthetic dimensions of language. A Framework for Language Education would help users to evaluate the type of emphasis in their own approach.