

## Reading and writing as arithmetic

Is learning a language like learning maths?



At the moment, Britain is involved in one of its periodic debates about an alleged decline in educational standards. On an almost daily basis one hears the view that all problems can be solved by getting back to basics. **Scott Thornbury** looks at the issues involved, and their relevance to language teaching.

I wish to write about language about language – that is to say, the language that is used to talk about language, and, specifically about the teaching of language. There is a strong suggestion – in the discourse of mainstream language education – that language is like maths, and that literacy and numeracy have so much in common that they can be mentioned in the same breath. Thus, in a Department of Education and Employment press release dated 8th December 1999, we find:

Those schools which have adopted the tried and tested methods – grammar, spelling and phonics in literacy and times tables and mental arithmetic in maths – have done extremely well.

Likewise, Chris Woodhead, Chief Inspector of Schools for England and Wales, argues (in the *Electronic Telegraph*, 17th January 1998) that:

The [newly introduced] literacy and numeracy strategies ought to ensure that the standard of teaching improves rapidly and substantially...

The connection between literacy and numeracy becomes apparent later in the same article:

These are 'traditional' methods, in the sense that phonics will be at the heart of the teaching of reading and the mastery of number will be central to everything that is done in mathematics.

According to this view, both language and mathematics are best taught from the 'bottom up'. That is, the systems are broken down into their basic components, and it is the transmission of these 'atoms' of knowledge that is the job of the teacher. What's more, 'the teacher will teach rigorously, purposefully and, for much of the time, to the whole class'. (*ibid.*)

This atomistic approach is associated not only with rigour but with traditional values, as reported in the *Electronic Telegraph*:

Mathematics has suffered more than any other subject from the 'unfortunate' progressive teaching methods in primary education, according to the man responsible for the Government's 'back to basics' numeracy hour strategy, which was launched yesterday.

Prof David Reynolds blamed teachers, teacher training lecturers and local authority advisors for turning their backs on tried-and-tested methods – such as whole-class teaching, times tables and mental arithmetic – despite mounting evidence that children were failing. For the past 10 years or more, teachers had spent only a quarter of maths lessons actually teaching... (*Electronic Telegraph*, 9th July 1998)

One of the reasons that progressive methods of education are 'unfortunate' (according to this discourse) is that they are unsystematic and therefore wasteful:

Much teaching of both literacy and numeracy is neither sufficiently demanding nor properly systematic... There are reading lessons where little or no explicit teaching of reading ever happens... (Woodhead, *op.cit*)

Moreover, this lack of system is reflected in some teachers' manner and appearance:

New teachers will not be allowed to work in state primary schools after September next year unless they can teach children to read by the traditional method known as systematic phonics – sounding out words... New teachers will also need to possess the 'personal, intellectual and presentational qualities suitable for teaching'. Mrs Shephard [the then Education and Employment Secretary] said: 'I hope scruffy teachers don't get qualified teacher status...' (*Electronic Telegraph*, 19th February, 1997)

There is an echo here of Prince Charles' much cited complaint (quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 29th June 1989) that:

We've got to produce people who can write proper English... We must educate for character. That's the trouble with schools. They don't educate for character. This matters a great deal. The whole way schools are operating is not right. I do not believe English is being taught properly. You cannot educate people properly unless you do it on a basic framework and drilling system.

We are all familiar with this discourse: clusters of loosely associated concepts such as *grammar*, *phonics*, *system*, *'back to basics'*, *tried and tested methods*, *drilling*, *teacher presentation* and *rigour* are contrasted with *progressive methods*, *group work*, *time-wasting*, *lack of character* and *scruffiness*. Literacy is aligned with numeracy because, according to this view, both are best taught atomistically and systematically. Just as numbers are the basic unit of maths, so are phonics (sound-spelling relationships) the basic unit of language.

This is what Giroux (1997) has called the *culture of positivism*. Positivism is the philosophical viewpoint by which 'knowledge becomes identified with

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scientific methodology, and its orientation towards self-subsistent facts whose law-like connections can be grasped descriptively' (p. 11). According to the positivist view, 'knowledge ... becomes not only countable and measurable, it also becomes impersonal. Teaching in this pedagogical paradigm is usually discipline-based and treats subject matter in a compartmentalized and atomized fashion.' (p. 21). An educational system based on positivist principles, such as the 'new conservatism' presently operating on both sides of the Atlantic, works to 'promote passivity and rule-following rather than critical engagement on the part of teachers and students'. (p. 89).

New conservatives have seized the initiative and argued that the current crisis in public education is due to loss of authority... For the new conservatives, learning approximates a practice mediated by strong teacher authority and a student willingness to learn the basics... (p. 95)

But what, you may be asking, has this got to do with teaching English as a foreign language? Well, consider the following extract from the introduction to a currently popular coursebook:

### **The ever-changing world of English language teaching**

There have been many stimulating and innovatory developments in language teaching over the past decade. These have produced activities designed to practise language in realistic, communicative activities in the classroom. Teachers have become aware that language exchanges and language exposure should be as real and authentic as possible.

*However*, we feel that there is a danger in our profession of always rejecting the 'old' in favour of the 'new'. This has led to a certain neglect of many tried-and-tested approaches, activities, and exercise types which benefited generations of teachers and learners. There is almost an assumption that nobody learned a language successfully before the arrival of the communicative approach. In the *Headway* series, we have always tried to combine the best of the old and the new.

### **Teaching beginners is different!**

Low-level language learners require a very logical, step-by-step approach. Activities and tasks that work perfectly well at an intermediate level and above are not always suitable for learners who have so little language at their disposal.

- **New language** needs to be introduced in a clear, unambiguous presentation. It needs to be practised not only in communicative, meaningful ways, but in drills and exercises where language is used for display purposes only. Students need the support and confidence of merely knowing that they can pronounce and produce the target language.

(Soars and Soars, 1993, p.4)

Note the similarities with the positivist discourse associated with the new conservatives: 'innovatory' progressive methods are contrasted with 'tried

and tested approaches' (tried and tested by whom?). By implication progressive 'communicative' methods are less appropriate than *Headway's* 'logical step-by-step approach'. Teacher 'presentation' is prioritised over 'activities and tasks'. Drilling is foregrounded; meaningful communication is backgrounded. And a glance at the syllabus of this book (and of the many copycat courses that this series has spawned) attests to the fact that the way the language is organised for teaching purposes is essentially atomistic.

So what? (you may be asking again). Well, nothing – except contrast this view of language learning with a statement made by two researchers:

Of the scores of detailed studies of naturalistic and classroom language learning reported over the past 30 years, none suggest, for example, that presentation of discrete points of grammar one at a time ... bears any resemblance except an accidental one to either the order or the manner in which naturalistic or classroom acquirers learn those items. As Rutherford (1988) noted, SLA is not a process of accumulating entities. (Long, M. and Robinson, P. 1998, p. 16)

If this is the case, then a positivist approach to language teaching is not supported by a jot of research evidence. While such an approach may be appropriate to the teaching of maths, it does not seem to fit comfortably with language. Atomistic rules may be enlisted to (partially) describe language, but they cannot, it seems, cause its acquisition.

So why has such a view persisted for so long? Simply because it lends itself to the ideological formation that embraces standards, order, control and the maintenance of the status quo – a viewpoint that asserts the authority of the teacher, and maintains the learner in a subservient, even colonised, position. According to Giroux (*op cit*):

There is little in the positivist pedagogical model that encourages students to generate their own meanings, to capitalize on their own cultural capital, or to participate in evaluating their own classroom experiences. The principles of order, control and certainty in positivist pedagogy appear inherently opposed to such an approach. (p. 25)

Where literacy is just a numbers game, the learner is never the winner.

#### REFERENCES

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