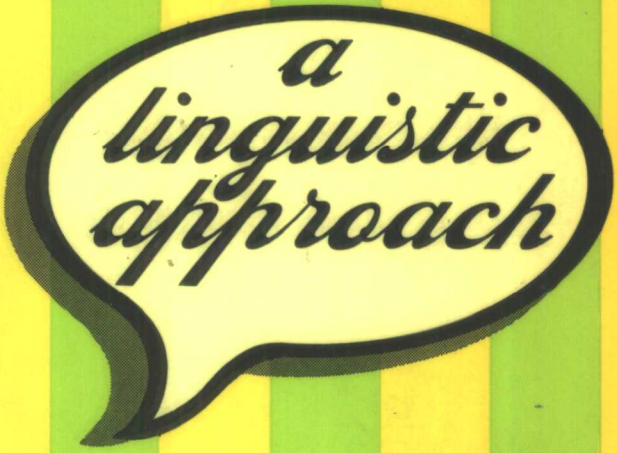
TEACHING ENGLISH



John Keen

Teaching English

a linguistic approach

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'In a station of the metro' by Ezra Pound is reproduced (p. 86*) by kind permission of the publishers, Faber & Faber Ltd.*

Preface

Teachers now have available to them more knowledge than ever before about language and the part that it plays in the learning that goes on – or does not go on – in schools and in colleges. Yet this knowledge is only slowly having an impact upon classroom practice. Teachers too often persevere with teaching methods that don't work, using books that reproduce the same ineffective approaches for generation after generation. The evidence provided by the Adult Literacy Project, which caters successfully for people of all ages from 16 to 87, is proof enough that some of the time-honoured approaches to students' language problems have never worked.

John Keen attempts, in this book, to show how linguistic knowledge of language, that is, scientifically-based knowledge of language as opposed to the mythical knowledge still current in schools and colleges among teachers of all disciplines, may be used to give effective help to students in need of it. He regards it as axiomatic that students in schools and colleges have a right to effective help from their teachers. It follows from this that teachers have a professional duty to understand how such help can best be given, and this implies, given the knowledge now available, a need to understand the approach advocated here.

This approach is rooted in the belief that *all* students possess some skills in using language, and that, essentially, teaching consists in showing how best they can use those skills, and how best they can improve skills that aren't adequate to meet demands made on them. The need to write appropriately, and at length, in a given context, is a task that is constantly laid upon students. In successive chapters, John Keen deals with aspects of this process – with spelling and grammar, with the notion that writing appropriately is essentially a matter of making 'meaning in context', with the means by which we ensure that what we write becomes a coherent whole.

His message is a simple one: that an adequate knowledge of language is essential to the teacher if students are to get the help to which they have a right. He not only argues his case persuasively, but gives an abundance of examples to demonstrate the practice.

July 1977 *Geoffrey Thornton*

Introduction

Nobody these days doubts the importance of language for education. We have learned in the past couple of decades that the way teachers use language in the classroom has a marked effect on how students and pupils learn. We are becoming gradually more aware that language is important, not only in the English lesson, but also in the other humanities subjects, and in the learning of science and crafts. We are becoming more aware that some children are failing in our schools and colleges when they should not be failing, and that this has something to do with language. 'Language for learning', 'language across the curriculum' have become part of the educational vocabulary. And what goes on in the English lesson is central to all these problems. Yet what does go on in the English lesson? The following chapters are directed to this question. They represent an attempt to work towards an approach that has emerged from my own changing perception of what English teaching is.

The question that underlies each chapter is this: what are the best ways of using the language skills already possessed by students and pupils? (I shall hereinafter refer simply to 'students'.) Answering these questions in a practical way means asking many others en route. How can we describe and assess 'language skills' and what

access do we have to them? Is it possible to achieve this aim, or would it be better to discard existing language skills and replace them with something else? People working in the study of language have provided the means for a response to these questions. This book is such a response.

What I say makes few claims to originality. It is much more a synthesis of what is already known, and my aim is to make this knowledge more accessible to teachers. If this book stimulates some interest in this relatively unfamiliar material by showing its relevance to the classroom then I will count it as a success.

I would like to express my thanks to Geoffrey Thornton for his help and encouragement, to Dr Avis Dickinson for her patient support and to my students who have taught me as much as I have taught them.

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1 Structures and functions

Structures

People can speak and understand the speech of others; it is hard not to feel awe at that, for what lies behind speaking and understanding is the most complex system made by man. The complexity is coded in the mind of each speaker, yet it remains, for the most part, unexploited in schools and colleges. People in education tend to take for granted what students know already, and to focus on what they do not know. This is a dangerous policy for it produces a mean caricature of education; if we are to have an attitude of humility towards what we do not know may we not also glory in what we do know? It is dangerous also because it is inefficient. To learn something it is necessary to be able to fasten on to it by already acquired knowledge and skills. Without this process new knowledge would merely be stored without being assimilated.

In language study there is a unique opportunity to translate this theory into meaningful educational practice. All speakers have a profound familiarity with the language they speak. This familiarity is implicit rather than explicit; a speaker of English 'knows' the grammatical rules which allow him to say, 'It's a great big fat red thing.' but not, *'It's a red big fat great thing.' (* indicates a sentence which is unacceptable in a language.) But that does not mean he could *say*

what the rules are. The question is, how can the implicit knowledge of these rules be used? This book tries to explore some ways of answering that question. The place to begin this exploration is with language used by students, and for that purpose I shall discuss the following essay, written by a student early in an 'O' level course.

Market Day in Winter

Bad weather never prevents market folk from doing business. It was a cold day and the snow was falling rapidly. Heavey traffic on the road caused the snow on the road to go slushy. Shop roofs were caped with an inch or more of snow. Snow clung to the glass of windows and reminded me of views on christmas cards.

People walked quickly round the stalls of the market and only stopping to buy goods and not to look. Children in prams cried because they were cold and getting wetter by the minute. Water from snow flowed off the canvas of the stalls roof to collect in puddles. However the market folk did'nt seem to mind the bad weather. They exhibited their goods with magnificent gestures and had mock arguments to draw attention to themselves.

The stalls were packed with every kind of fruits and vegetables on could think off, but the bad weather did nothing to highlight their grandness. Another stall was packed with antiques but trade was slow as bargin hunters were few and far between.

The hat and glove stall was doing a tremendous trade, has many shopers did not anticape the wintery weather the afternoon brought.

At the bus stop dozens of people queued for buses that had been delayed. The queues of people resembled walls, they were all tighly packed together dressed in long overcoats and each holding an umbrella.

Building in the distance became faint due to the heavy snow fall and only their outlines could be seen. People walking up the streets resembled dark objects without any real shape.

Adults were not amused by the weather but for a short time children playing did received some excitement from the snowball fights, which were going on in the park, adjcent to the market place.

The essay contains several errors of spelling and grammar of the type often marked by teachers 'careless'. This kind of semi-moral judge-

ment is often used because a teacher does not fully understand the nature of an error. To understand an error as representing what a student cannot do it is necessary to understand what he can do, so let us look at this.

Before I begin this part of the discussion I need a generally understood method for bringing out the structure of sentences and phrases; I need a means of grammatical description. In giving a (simplified) set of categories for such a description I shall define the categories by *distribution*. That is to say, classes of words are defined according to the position in which they occur in a sentence. Words which occur in the same kind of position will count as members of the same class. So, for example, the occurrence of 'the' or 'a' in a sentence signals the fact that at some later point a *noun* will occur. So a definition of 'noun' might include the characterization, 'a non-adjective occurring after "the" or "a".' (This assumes we have already defined 'adjective'.) There are a lot of problems in defining classes of words this way, but it is a much more accurate method than the 'notional methods', which involve defining classes of words in terms of their general meaning. Thus, 'a noun is a naming word', 'a verb is a doing word'. These definitions work perfectly well for someone who can already differentiate nouns and verbs, but they are no use to anyone else. For example, does not the word 'run' in 'Run to the shop' name the act of running? And is not 'movement' a doing word *par excellence*? For more detailed discussion I would refer the reader to any of the introductory books on grammar mentioned in 'Further Reading' at the end of this book. My proposed classes of words are:

N (*Noun*) Any word which can occur in the context (T) – V
Any non-adjective occurring after 'the' or 'a/an'
Any non-adjective occurring after an adjective

V (*Verb*) Any word which can occur with a past tense marker (often -ed)
Any word which can occur with -ing

A (*Adjective*) Any word which can occur between 'the' or 'a/an' and N but not before plural -s

T (*Determiner*) Any word which can occur before N or A but not before V

P (*Preposition*) This class of words is small enough to be defined initially by listing ('in, on, to, with . . .')

wh- (*Relative pronoun*) Any of the following words occurring between N and V: which, who, that, what, where, when.

These definitions are based on Harris (1946). They are not intended to be watertight; they are intended to suggest the lines on which a full characterization might be done. Again I urge the reader to more specialized works to fill in the gaps.

Let us look first at the student's noun phrases. These are sometimes of great complexity. I shall list the structures he uses, with examples of each:

(1) N *or* TN

business (line 1)
the snow (line 2)
their grandness (line 15)
an umbrella (line 23)

(2) AN *or* TAN

bad weather (line 1)
magnificent gestures (line 11)
a cold day (line 2)
the bad weather (line 14)

(3) NN *or* TNN (The first noun modifies the second).

shop roofs (line 3)
the bus stop (line 20)
christmas cards (line 5)
the snowball fights
(= T(NN)N) lines 28–9)

(4) ANPTN

heavey traffic on the road (lines 2–3)

(5) TNPN

the glass of windows (lines 4–5)

(6) NPNN

views on christmas cards (line 5)

(7) TNPTN

the stalls of the market (line 6)

(8) N wh- V (V stands for the whole of the complex verb; here 'had been delayed').

buses that had been delayed (lines 20–1)

(9) T(NN)N wh- VPTNPTNN

the snowball fights which were going on in the park adjcent to the market place (lines 28–30)

(I am counting 'adjacent to' as a preposition, even though it is not a single word, because single-word prepositions can substitute for it. e.g. 'the park *near* the market place').

All human beings in the process of learning how to use language have to feel their way experimentally towards its rules. In the light of the above data it would not be implausible to suggest that this student is experimenting with the English noun phrase. Linguistic analysis alone cannot give us a direction for teaching; but when this analysis is coupled with a statement of principle a direction for practice can follow. In this case, for example, believing that we should 'start where the student is at' tells us nothing about what we can actually *do*. And merely having some tools for linguistic analysis gives us no clues about what to do with them. To adapt Kant, principles without methods are empty; methods without principles are blind. With both, however, we can begin to develop useful lines for classroom practice. For example, the student has included several NN constructions. These are particularly interesting to teachers and students who are concerned with exploring language, since even a brief examination of them brings out the enormous complexities that are concealed by seemingly simple constructions. Here is a possible lesson guide for such an exploration:

Session 1

The NN phrases used in the essay should be listed and used as a core for obtaining a larger set of NN phrases. This may be done by asking the class for words that can fill the gaps created by deleting a word from each of the NN phrases. Thus:

Fill each blank with a noun:
bus — — stop

(If students are unfamiliar with the term 'noun', or find that they are not sure what counts as a noun and what does not, the teacher might introduce a simple test, stipulating that each word suggested for the blanks should also be able to fit in 'It's a/an —'. So 'company' and 'door' would pass the test, whereas 'large' would not.) The resulting phrases might include ones similar to these:

bus —	— stop
bus company	emergency stop

bus driver	door stop
bus shelter	pit stop

As many phrases as possible should be collected.

Session 2

The data obtained from session 1 should be displayed. The class should be asked to restate each phrase in some other way, keeping the original meaning. This might result in something like:

The driver of the bus *or* The man who drives the bus

A shelter for bus passengers

A stop because of an emergency

A stop for the door

A stop at the pit

Already it is clear that the seemingly simple NN construction subsumes a large number of other different constructions. If the class wished to take the exploration further they could group together forms that they perceive to be similar in structure. Or they could examine other apparently similar structures which cannot be expressed as NN phrases. For example, 'a stop for the door' can become 'a door stop', while 'a present for my mother' cannot become 'a mother present'. (The rules which constrain NN phrases are not absolute, and there is a good deal of room for creativity; it may be more useful to talk of rules and tendencies rather than just of rules. In poetry particularly 'a mother present' could be used as a legitimate construction. Dylan Thomas, one of the more ingenious exploiters of English grammatical rules, refers, in 'After the Funeral', to 'a judgment clout' and a 'fountain heart', both of which are NN phrases which would be thought deviant, or at least odd, in ordinary speech.)

One of the values of the kind of exercise outlined is that it has an explicating function; the skills which the student showed in his essay have been made explicit. This in itself may be counter-productive, of course. One criterion we have for judging skilfulness is how well a person can perform a task without thinking about how he is performing it. But in this case the explicitness of the skills means that the student is more aware of the choices available to him, and it is partly

in this that the process of widening the possibilities of language use consists.

It is important to recognize that 'explicitness' is not an absolute idea. Books on formal grammar try to achieve maximum explicitness by means of careful enumeration of relevant categories and painstaking descriptions of how these categories interact. Most speakers of a language could describe very few of the rules of their language in this explicit way; for them language is to be used, not to be studied. Yet between these two extremes there is a spectrum. Knowing how to construct the sentence, 'People walked round the stalls' requires only an implicit knowledge of grammatical rules. Knowing that these two sentences have the same structure requires more than just implicit knowledge:

People	walked round	the stalls.
The water	flowed off	the canvas.

And knowing that 'people' and 'water' are nouns, and belong to the same class of words as 'wheelbarrow' and 'dichotomy' involves a yet more explicit knowledge of language rules. The level of explicitness which we may use with our students depends on the level of explicitness they have already achieved and on the structure we wish to make clear. There is no point using a fully explicit grammatical description if the point can be made by a comparison with a similar structure. For example, if a student writes a 'sentence' like:

* People queueing for buses.

and a teacher wants the student to see that he ought to have used a finite form of the verb, then the teacher can either say, 'You should have used a finite verb' or he can compare this structure to ones in which the student has used a finite form, and take that as a point of departure. Thus:

* People queueing for buses.
People walked round the stalls.
Water flowed off the canvas.

This procedure involves a relatively low-level explicitness which consists of the act of comparing the structures rather than of describing them.

The same argument and principles that applied to the student's

NN phrases may be applied to the student's use of verb constructions. One of his favourite constructions is N V(N)P(T)N. (Items in brackets are optional.)

N	V	(N)	P	(T) N
People	walked		round	the stalls. (line 6)
water	flowed		off	the canvas. (lines 8–9)
they . . .	exhibited	their goods	with	gestures. (line 11)
people	queued		for	buses. (line 20)
they	were dressed		in	overcoats. (lines 21–2)
Adults	were not amused		by	the weather. (line 27)
children	received	excitement	from	the fights. (lines 28–9)

(I have counted verb particles as prepositions to simplify the analysis.)

When we are trying to understand someone's mistakes we need to be able to place them in the context of correct performances. Indeed one cannot make a mistake in something unless one can do it fairly well to begin with. I can make a mistake in speaking French because I can speak a little French. I cannot make a mistake in speaking Hindi because I can speak no Hindi at all. If this seems obvious and trivial, consider the approach to teaching that concerns itself with students' mistakes out of the context of things the student can do well. The student whose work we are considering can use prepositions correctly; indeed he takes a certain delight in using a wide variety of them, in both noun and verb constructions. Use of the sessions outlined above, or some similar sessions with the N V(N)P N sentences as a basis, would imply a recognition of that fact – a recognition that has much more point than the usual kind of encouragement given by teachers: 'good work', 'a fair effort' and so on. If we look at this student's mistakes we see that, for example, he duplicates the past tense in line 28:

Children playing *did received* some excitement . . .

A student at this level of language ability would probably see the nature of his mistake if it was pointed out to him, but if he did not then in his text there are similar patternings which may be used to show him the grammatical choices open to him. The similarity may be demonstrated simply by placing the two structures together: