

# MY LANGUAGE OUR LANGUAGE

Meeting special needs in English 11-16

Bernadette Walsh

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MY LANGUAGE, OUR  
LANGUAGE: MEETING  
SPECIAL NEEDS IN  
ENGLISH 11-16

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BERNADETTE WALSH

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# TEACHING SECONDARY ENGLISH

*General Editor: Peter King*

## My Language, Our Language

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'Our language is our principal means of making sense of our experience and communication with others. The teaching of English is concerned with the essential skills of speech, reading and writing, and with literature' (*The School Curriculum*, DES, 1981).

Drawing on over ten years of teaching and research, Bernadette Walsh provides a practical approach to teaching pupils with language learning difficulties in the secondary school. Many of these pupils enter secondary school believing themselves to be failures in all areas because of their inability to express themselves in words. Walsh emphasises that learning difficulties of this sort often stem from emotional problems and can only be overcome by establishing warm teacher-pupil relationships based on trust and mutual acceptance and fostered by the spoken language.

The book is based around the teacher's diary which Bernadette Walsh kept as a daily record of her work in the classroom. This vivid and immediate account lends weight to her argument that only an arts-based curriculum involving poetry, story, drama, dance, art, and – above all – talk, can help the development of children with special educational needs. The diary is also a rich source of practical guidance for the teacher on how to build on the child's own experience to achieve new levels of expressive written and spoken language. Practising teachers of English, art and drama as well as specialist teachers of special needs will find new ideas for teaching non-exam sets in this book. Student teachers will find in it a compelling and realistic introduction to a challenging area of their future profession.

Bernadette Walsh is Language Adviser for Rotherham Education Authority. She was previously Lecturer in Education at the University of Nottingham.

This series provides a focus for a variety of aims and teaching styles in contemporary English teaching. It is designed both for new teachers who want a simple guide to good practice, and for more experienced teachers who may want to revitalize their own teaching by considering alternative ideas and methods.

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For my friends

**'Language speaks'**  
**(M. Heidegger)**

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## GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

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Over many decades English has been a central subject in the secondary school curriculum, a position confirmed by the proposals for a national curriculum contained within the 1988 Education Act. Parents and employers, pupils and teachers appear to accept this centrality and would probably agree with these confident words which come from a statement about the function of English in the curriculum made by the D.E.S. in 1981:

English is of vital importance in the development of pupils as individuals and as members of society: our language is our principal means of making sense of our experience and communication with others. The teaching of English is concerned with the essential skills of speech, reading and writing, and with literature. Schools will doubtless continue to give them high priority.

(*The School Curriculum*, D.E.S., 1981)

Such confidence belies the fact that there has been, and continues to be, much debate among practitioners as to exactly what constitutes English. The desired consensus remains altogether uncertain, despite the framework suggested by a national core curriculum and the introduction of grade criteria to indicate the levels of understanding and skills demanded in the curriculum for GCSE English. But at least the interested teacher now has a large and useful literature on which he or she

can profitably reflect in the attempt to answer the question 'What is English?' There have been notable books designed to re-orientate teachers' thinking about the subject from the pioneering and somewhat evangelical *Growth Through English* by John Dixon (1975) to the more recent publications arising from important research into the development of writing abilities which include *The Quality of Writing* (1986), by Andrew Wilkinson.

Although it is essential for the English teacher to understand and appreciate the nature of theoretical and research study supporting the subject, what he or she most needs at the present time is help to increase awareness of curriculum possibilities and to reflect upon day to day classroom experience. During the 1980s a number of books have provided help for English teachers to get a purchase on their daily activities – books like David Jackson's *Continuity in Secondary English* (1983), which attempts to sketch a developmental framework for English 11–16, and Robert Protherough's *Developing Response to Fiction* (1983) concerned with creating space for exploring pupils' response to books. While new ideas for teaching English are always welcome a teacher's confidence is not so much built from making 'everything new' as much as from learning to combine the best from the older traditions with some of those newer ideas. And preferably these ideas have to be seen to have emerged from effective classroom teaching. The English teacher's aims have to be continually reworked in the light of new experience, and the assurance necessary to manage this is bred out of the convictions of other experienced practitioners. This is of particular importance to the new and inexperienced teacher. It is to such teachers and student teachers that this series is primarily directed.

The books in this series are intended to give practical guidance in the various areas of the English curriculum. Each area is treated in a separate volume in order to gain the necessary space in which to discuss it at some length. The aim of the series is twofold: to describe good practice by exploring the approaches and activities reflected in the daily work of an English teacher in the comprehensive school; and to give a practical lead to teachers who wish to try out for themselves a wider repertoire of teaching skills and ways of organizing syllabuses and lessons. Taken as a whole, the series does not press upon the reader a ready-made philosophy, but attempts to

provide a map of the English teaching landscape in which the separate volumes highlight an individual feature of that terrain, representing its particular characteristics while reminding us of the continuity between these differing elements in the overall topography.

The series addresses itself to the 11-16 age range with an additional volume on sixth-form work, and assumes a mixed ability grouping, at least in the first two years of schooling. Each volume begins with a discussion of the problems and rationale of its chosen aspect of English and goes on to describe practical ways in which the teachers can organize their syllabus and lessons to achieve their intended goals, and ends with a brief guide to books, resources, etc. The individual volumes are written by experienced teachers with a particular interest in their chosen area and the ideas they express have been proved by them or their colleagues in their own classrooms.

It is at the level of the practical that any synthesis of the various approaches to English can be gained, and to accomplish this every teacher must be in possession of a rationale and an awareness of good methods wherever and however they have been achieved. By reading the books in this series it is to be hoped that teachers will be encouraged to try out for themselves ideas found effective by their colleagues, so gaining the confidence to make their own informed choice and planning in their own classrooms.

Peter King  
January 1989

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‘In all things we learn only from those we love’

(Goethe)

I am grateful for the permission to re-print Adrian Henri’s ‘Poem instead of a Photograph’.

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Thanks are also due especially to Brenda Lawrence, Helen Banks, Steven Bennett, and Roger George. They are more than merely colleagues at the University of Nottingham, rather I have benefited considerably from their support and good counselling as friends.

To my other friends particularly: Eileen Tomlinson, Maureen Stevenson, Richard Green, Deborah Henley, Rosemary Hale, Sally Hull, Kathryn Clay, Sue Trickett, Mary Magill, Frank Murphy, Jo Dougan, Lesley and Steven Ross, Carol and Steven Wilson, and my sister, Philomena. I owe special thanks for their

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NOTES FROM A TEACHER'S  
JOURNAL

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'When love and skill work together, expect a miracle'  
(John Ruskin)

This book started from dissatisfaction with accepted (including many 'progressive') approaches to the teaching of children with special needs. Despite the claims that the GCSE examinations have been, at least in theory, designed to encompass all abilities, inevitably there will be some children who will not be entered for public examinations. It is for such pupils that an alternative approach to meeting their needs in English Studies is suggested.

Furthermore, just when more enlightened Special Needs Departments have gradually phased out the testing of 'under-achieving' pupils, the national curriculum (Department of Education and Science/1985) proposal to test at the ages of 7, 11, 14, and 16 is only going to reinforce failure for these pupils, as before. The rigidities of the national curriculum are the reverse of the creative framework that might respond to individual need. A slight fillip of course, is that 'statemented' children (DES 1981) are exempt from the full national curriculum diet. But in the ordinary classroom, there are many children with learning difficulties who have not been formally statemented. How are such children's needs to be met? Similarly, the Kingman Report (DES 1988) and the Cox report (DES 1988) seem to neglect anything but the functional use of

## 2 *My Language, Our Language*

language with emphasis upon chronological development. This view entirely neglects that the development of language begins by gradually becoming part of the everyday interchanges of life in a particular environment. Language development is inseparable from the social learning and social context and the emotional climate in which learning in the wider sense takes place.

To be fully human, requires one to live with others in a shared world. If we regard teaching as a matter of helping and encouraging the child to discover and to share the world, then teaching is a case of relating to one another as centres of caring, which was recognized long ago by John Stuart Mill:

Real education depends on the contact of human living soul with human living soul.

(J. S. Mill, letter to Rev. Stephen Hawtry,  
quoted in R. Fletcher 1971: 396)

Using the word 'soul' here, Mill brings to mind the idea of a person as a centre of caring. It will be accepted that good teaching of a child depends upon contacting his or her being, and moreover, contacting it in a loving way. Even love though, must find overt expression and since education requires personal contact, it must be achieved through bodily encounters. There must be ways in which the contact between one living present human being and another creates an emotional channel of communication along which meaning can pass more readily than it can by way of the written or printed word. Mary Warnock has summed up this relationship thus:

And so the teacher is a teacher of individuals, even if he spends most of his time facing a class. The impact he makes on a child is essentially that of one person on another. No amount of distance-teaching, useful though these may be for certain specific tasks, will ever be a substitute for the human interchange between the teacher and his individual pupil. It is a heavy responsibility for the teacher to bear, one that requires confidence and deserves respect.

(Warnock, M. 1985: 7)

We can all identify with some teacher – often not anyone of great renown – from whom we have caught some inspiration

that could not be given through books, but only by personal contact between teacher and pupil. Learning then is an act of relationship. Difficulties encountered in the sphere of relationships in learning often parallel the more measurable difficulties in the development of a child's linguistic abilities. How then, does the association between language and relationship relate to the classroom as a context for learning, when the language curriculum currently on offer to children with special needs pays little or no regard to the individual's emotional growth?

Much of the curriculum for children with special needs is founded on the belief that refinement of language and its enrichment can only come through teaching language skills. This results in a narrowing of aims in English Studies, with a corresponding loss of imagination and vitality in the pupils' responses. Nor does this sort of approach reinforce the teacher's own stimulating ideas, but tends to become a substitute for her own initiative and does not alert attention to the particular needs of individuals. The teacher's responses must meet the real needs of the children and not just the material needs of reading and writing. A curriculum that is worthy of a place in our educational system provides an opportunity to enrich the child's life far beyond the academic requirements. Feeling, like thought, is complex and in order for it to exist with full intensity, it needs an environment in which it can flourish.

For a curriculum to offer satisfaction rather than frustration, its content must be in tune with the individual child's potential and so give the child the means to grow. An imposed curriculum expects the child to conform to its contents without considering whether a child can contribute to its demands from his or her available resources. A curriculum with which the child feels no affinity, attacks self-esteem by persuading the child that his or her interests and aspirations are of no account. Acquiring language is a natural, creative process and English work should be seen to offer creative extensions and a creative discipline to a child's existing language through art-discourse. One will then be building on foundations laid before the child has ever reached school, in other words, upon each individual's cultural and natural endowment, the acceptance of which is the crucial factor for establishing relationships. For the organization of language always starts within the original relationship of mother (caregiver) and child.

#### 4 *My Language, Our Language*

A succession of writers – Witkin (1974), Ross (1978), Abbs (1982), Harrison (1983b), Dunlop (1984), Best (1985), and Walsh (1988) – have called for a creative curriculum directing the whole spirit of learning towards renewal in our language and living. True education does not neglect those critical skills of communication that a pupil needs; but this is not to be seen as resorting to a diet of ‘the basics’; for, deprived of creative content and activity, a language has no basics. If we stopped inferring to the child, through the sparse curriculum we present, that he or she is poor in language, but instead listened a moment to what the child is struggling to say, then living language would become interwoven with living being.

Language functions in the classroom context to convey meanings and these arise as interpretations and are placed upon the behaviour of others, including the teacher. In attempting to be explicit for others, the child is able to guide his or her own thinking and feeling. He or she begins to understand his or her relationship to others and to express feelings and attitudes. Language is part of the process by which meaning is articulated. Merleau-Ponty (1962) consistently maintained that ‘language accomplishes thinking’, and here he referred to the spoken language by which the speaker organizes his or her words in order to actualize this meaning:

What then does language express if it does not express thoughts? It presents or rather it is the subject’s taking up of a position in the world of his meanings.

(Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962: 193)

Meaning then, often comes with the act of talking. Thus talk is an individual expression of questing thought when every word and silence is capable of revealing the living individual to the listener. That language is the medium through which thought can articulate itself is a view held by Vygotsky who concluded that:

The relation between thought and word is a living process, though born through words. A word devoid of meaning is a dead thing, a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow.

(Vygotsky, L. S. (1932: 153)