CHILDREN'S WRITING AND READING

Analysing Classroom Language

> He did not expect To see three tortoises.
> A man dog was holding the man's leg.
> The man was foot was slipping off the cliff.
> I would jump off the cliff if I saw a lot of animal
> Would you?

> The Vikings were cruel and tortured their
> prisoners and they killed and slaughtered
> the mums and children. They poked them with
> spears and they were also very good
> craftsmen, for they carved their own boats
> and ships.

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Acknowledgements

Symbols

*	grammatically unacceptable form, e.g. *this boys*
?	unlikely but not impossible form, e.g. *?red tall chimneys*
!	semantically unlikely or impossible utterance, !*Goliath killed a stone.*
( )	within an example, the bracketed element is optional, e.g. *Jim knew* (*that*) *Bill would come.*
[ ]	within an example, square brackets mark the position where ellipsis has occurred, e.g. *Bob swept the room and* [ ] *lit the fire.*
/ /	slant brackets enclose phonemic transcription
⟨ ⟩	angle brackets enclose a written form as opposed to a spoken one, e.g. 'The plural is formed with ⟨-s⟩ or ⟨-es⟩.'
.../	slant lines mark tone-unit boundaries
– –	pause (length indicated by the number of dashes)
`	falling intonation nucleus
´	rising intonation nucleus
ˇ	fall-rise intonation nucleus
ˆ	rise-fall intonation nucleus
'	stressed syllable

Phonemic symbols used in transcription

CONSONANTS

p	pet	/pet/		s	sit	/sɪt/
b	bed	/bed/		z	zoo	/zu/
t	tub	/tʌb/		ʃ	ship	/ʃɪp/
d	do	/du/		ʒ	measure	/meʒə/
k	cat	/kæt/		h	hat	/hæt/
g	gap	/gæp/		m	men	/men/
tʃ	chin	/tʃɪn/		n	nag	/næg/
dʒ	jam	/dʒæm/		ŋ	sing	/sɪŋ/
f	fell	/fel/		l	let	/let/
v	vat	/væt/		r	red	/red/
θ	thin	/θɪn/		j	yes	/jes/
ð	then	/ðen/		w	wet	/wet/

VOWELS

i	read	/rid/		ɜ	bird	/bɜd/
ɪ	rid	/rɪd/		ə	the	/ðə/
e	bed	/bed/		eɪ	say	/seɪ/
æ	bad	/bæd/		əʊ	so	/səʊ/
ɑ	calm	/kɑm/		aɪ	high	/haɪ/
ɒ	cot	/kɒt/		aʊ	how	/haʊ/
ɔ	caught	/kɔt/		ɒɪ	toy	/tɒɪ/
ʊ	good	/gʊd/		ɪə	here	/hɪə/
u	mood	/mud/		ɛə	there	/ðɛə/
ʌ	hut	/hʌt/		aɪə	fire	/faɪə/

Abbreviations used in grammatical description

Brackets indicate that the additional symbols are optional; the full form is used only when specificity is required.

A	clause element: adverbial
adj	adjective
Adj P	multi-word adjectival phrase
adv	adverb
AP	multi-word adverbial phrase
aux	auxiliary verb
Aux VP	auxiliary verb phrase
C_o	clause element: object complement
$C_{(s)}$	clause element: (subject) complement
c	co-ordinator
Cat VP	catenative verb phrase
cop	copula
d	determiner
int	intensifier
n	noun
n	(subscript) any number, e.g. adj_n = any number of adjectives
no.	cardinal number
NP	multi-word noun phrase
$O_{(d)}$	clause element: direct object
$O_{(i)}$	clause element: indirect object
o	ordinal
op	operator
part	particle
pre-d	pre-determiner
prep	preposition
post-d	post-determiner
q	quantifier
S	clause element: subject

s	subordinator
V	clause element: verb
v	member of word-class 'verb'
VP	multi-word verb phrase

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Experienced teacher witnesses were of one mind in their concern for recognizable progress in a child's command of language. As one head of department put it: 'I would quarrel with the philosophy that problems sort themselves out by continued and increased exposure to books and good English.'

(DES, 1975, pp. 172–3)

When children start school they have already acquired a great deal of oral language and within two or three years most of them have mastered the initial stages of learning to read and write. This does not mean, however, that subsequently these language abilities can be left to look after themselves. The quotation that begins this book comes from a chapter in the Bullock Report entitled 'Language in the Middle and Secondary Years': it suggests that teachers throughout much of the school age-range feel that they should take deliberate steps to extend their pupils' linguistic resources. This positive approach is endorsed by the Bullock Committee: 'We advocate, in short, planned intervention in the child's language development' (DES, 1975, p. 67).

In order for such intervention to succeed, it has to work in harmony with the natural sequence of language acquisition, since simply to teach some aspect of language without knowing whether the child is at an appropriate stage to respond to it is to invite failure for the pupil and disillusion for the teacher. Therefore, if teachers are going to plan activities to improve their pupils' command of language, they need a clear understanding of the normal course of language development. In addition, because reading and writing are so important in our education system and so much language work is concerned with these two modes, teachers also need to be aware of the rather complex relationships between oral and written language; not only class teachers in primary schools and English teachers in secondary schools, but also all those who use reading and writing as a means of teaching and testing their subject.

The chief focus of this book is on the grammatical structures of written

language – the structures of children's own writing and of material written for them in books, workcards, instructions and examination questions. Its main aim is to provide teachers (and others, such as speech therapists and educational psychologists) with the framework of knowledge that they need in order to be able, first, to assess their pupils' grammatical abilities, and then to intervene appropriately to extend them. Accordingly, chapter 3 outlines children's grammatical development from about eighteen months to fourteen years or so, and chapter 4 illustrates some of the differences between speech and writing. To describe the structures of a language comprehensibly, it is necessary to use an agreed system of grammatical analysis. For this reason, chapter 2 presents a grammatical framework for the description of English, so that all those who use this book share not only the same terminology but also an awareness of the grammatical principles that underlie the analysis. With this tripartite foundation of a grammatical description of English, knowledge of children's grammatical development, and an understanding of some of the differences between speech and writing, it becomes possible to examine some structural aspects of written language in the classroom: chapter 5 studies children's own writing and chapter 6 focuses on their reading materials.

The next two sections outline some of the ways in which the subject matter of chapters 5 and 6 can be of use to teachers in their routine classroom activities.

Children's writing

With regard to children's writing, there are many tasks which teachers have to undertake which can be carried out more confidently and consistently if there is some understanding of the stages that children pass through in their development as writers. The first such task to consider is the setting of written work. Here, an awareness of the different demands that are made by different kinds of writing can enable teachers to set assignments that are appropriate for the age and ability of their pupils, so that the ablest are stretched and the weakest supported. For example, in a mixed-ability history class, the ablest writers might tackle an essay entitled 'Florence Nightingale's contribution to nursing' while those who are struggling could attempt 'A letter from Scutari', or 'Extracts from Florence Nightingale's diary'. A developmental perspective also allows teachers to set work that will focus their pupils' attention on precise aspects of the craft of writing. Occasionally, student teachers' lesson plans give, as the objective of a writing lesson, 'To improve creative writing'. Such vagueness can be replaced by a more specific and realizable goal. For instance, pupils might be encouraged to describe a series of events out of chronological order, so that they begin to learn some of the special effects that can be achieved; they might be advised to take particular care over the links between sentences; they might experiment

with different ways of beginning their sentences; or they might start learning to handle structures other than the story. In this connection it is worth noting the results of a survey of children's writing carried out by the Bullock Committee: although over eighty per cent of their sample of nine-year-olds wrote original stories during the week in question, less than half wrote factual accounts based on 'personal investigations in connection with science and mathematics' (DES, 1975, p. 472).

Another task is the correction of written work. Teachers spend a great deal of time and effort in marking errors. It is therefore particularly important that they recognize that there are many kinds of mistake which, because they arise from a variety of causes, require different remedies. Although all the sentences from (1) to (4) contain grammatical errors, they cannot all be dealt with appropriately by some blanket comment like 'Be more careful' or 'Read through your work before you give it in':

1 In this particular rockpool that I looked in was so crammed with all kinds of marine life.
2 Children which had to work in the coal mines I feel bad about this.
3 His dog came with him to get the birds what the man killed.
4 Although they tried hard but they didn't win the match.

A closely related task is the assessment of writing. Whether teachers award a grade or write a comment such as 'You can do better than this', they are, inescapably, making judgements about the worth of each piece. They may be relating each one to the others in the set; or they may be comparing an individual's performance on this occasion and this topic with his performance on earlier occasions and other topics; or they may be considering his writing in relation to his oral response. In every case, such judgements involve assessment, comparison and evaluation. The clearer the criteria for making the judgements, the more reliable they are likely to be. Some of the criteria will be non-linguistic, of course. Depending on the nature of the particular assignment, they may include any of the following factors: liveliness, humour, imagination, factual accuracy, length, neatness, and so on. But at least some of the factors which influence the assessment will be purely linguistic ones, such as the range and appropriateness of the vocabulary, the maturity of sentence structures, and the cohesiveness of paragraphs.

Given that this book concentrates chiefly on grammatical features, it is encouraging to note that there is some evidence of a correlation between teachers' impressionistic assessments of children's writing and the level of occurrence of mature syntactic structures. In 1965, the London Association of Teachers of English selected twenty-eight pieces of writing from a corpus by fifteen-year-old pupils. A team of examiners assessed the essays impressionistically, assigning each one a grade on the scale A to E. Later, Yerrill (1977) made a grammatical analysis of these graded essays, noting particularly the occurrence of constructions which he had pre-

viously found to be indicators of linguistic maturity. His results showed that (with differences in length taken into account) the essays that had been graded A and B on overall impression contained two and a half times as many of these mature constructions as those graded C, D and E.

An advantage of the ability to recognize mature syntax is that it can help teachers to avoid underestimating their pupils' linguistic abilities and, consequently, forming expectations that are damagingly low. Sometimes writing can be scrappy and lacking interesting ideas, untidily presented in poor handwriting with bad spelling and weak punctuation, and yet still provide evidence of a certain linguistic maturity. It is understandably very difficult for teachers to see through all the weaknesses to the underlying strengths. Nevertheless, in order to build on what children can do and to make appropriate demands on them, it is essential to be aware of the good features that are buried beneath the dismal surface of the writing.

The last teaching task to mention is the provision of advice and guidance which will help pupils to improve their written work. That this is, in practice, very demanding is suggested by the following comment in the Bullock Report:

> Most [secondary teachers of English] suggested that whatever direct instruction in how to write might be needed by pupils could be presented by teachers during classroom writing lessons and could be based on actual experience in written communication. *Yet hour after hour of classroom observation failed to reveal many efforts to provide such direct help.* (DES, 1975, p. 172, my italics)

A pupil may produce a sentence like this:

> 5 I gave my brother a present that to my great relief and delight he very much liked it.

It is obviously easiest just to cross out *it* and, perhaps, to write a comment such as 'Use simpler sentences'. However, it would be more helpful (though admittedly more time-consuming) to demonstrate that the sentence is built up from two simpler ones:

> 5a I gave my brother a present.
> 5b To my great relief and delight, he very much liked it.

The structure becomes clearer if *to my great relief and delight* is temporarily omitted. Then, when (5a) and (5b) are joined, it is apparent that *a present* is referred to by *that*, so *it* is no longer needed:

> 5c I gave my brother a present *that* he very much liked.

Now, *to my great relief and delight* can be re-inserted:

> 5d I gave my brother a present that, to my great relief and delight, he very much liked.

Children's reading materials

It is important for teachers to be able to make an accurate assessment of the readability level of books and workcards, both when selecting materials for purchase in the first instance and when choosing books from the stock-room that will match as closely as possible the reading levels of the various groups within a class. Teachers habitually take into account such factors as presentation, interest level, vocabulary difficulty and conceptual demands, but they need also to be aware of the comprehension problems that can be caused by grammatical complexity and by certain types of discourse structure. Such an awareness is particularly valuable in those cases where the physical presentation of the book does not accurately reflect its level of linguistic difficulty. It is not uncommon, for example, for books with large print and full colour illustrations to contain language that is more suitable for secondary pupils than for the juniors that the publishers have apparently had in mind. Similarly, it sometimes happens that books marketed for CSE classes are linguistically more demanding than those aimed at HNC or 'A' level groups. (See, for example, Whitcombe, 1973.)

A sensitivity to grammatical complexity can also alert teachers to potential sources of misunderstanding in instructions and examination questions; hence, it provides a principled rather than a random basis for simplifying such materials. For instance, if pupils are given the following written instruction:

6a Do not write the results on the diagrams that you have drawn or colour the bar graphs.

and several of them do colour the bar graphs, it is clear that they are not just being perverse or disobedient. Rather, they have been unable to hold the negative in mind for the eleven words between *not* and *colour*. Nor have they recognized the force of *or*. Since skilled readers know that *or* after a negative means 'and ... not', this suggests an obvious way to revise the instructions:

6b Do not write the results on the diagrams that you have drawn *and do not* colour the bar graphs.

Perhaps the most important reason of all for teachers to be able to analyse the language structure of reading materials is that, having pinpointed linguistic difficulties, they are then in a position to provide explicit teaching to help children tackle them. After all, the teacher's aim should not be always to present pupils with the simplest language available. Books which contain vocabulary and grammatical constructions not commonly used in everyday speech are a potent source of language enrichment. To choose only simply-written books, or to simplify more demanding ones, would deprive children of this vital stimulus to their