DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 022 762 TE 000 664

By-Neufeld, J.

DIRECTIONS IN LANGUAGE.

Pub Date 68

Note-7p.

Journal Cit-The English Quarterly; A Publication of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English; v1 n1 p109-14 Summer 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.36

Descriptors-DIACHRONIC LINGUISTICS, ENGLISH, *ENGLISH CURRICULUM, *ENGLISH PROGRAMS, *LANGUAGE, *LANGUAGE ARTS, LINGUISTICS, MASS MEDIA, SUPPLEMENTARY READING MATERIALS, TEXTBOOK SELECTION

Identifiers-*Canada

The English curriculums of the 10 Canadian provinces reflect in differing degrees contemporary language concepts and scholarship. One of the most enlightened curriculums lauds the thinking that the teaching of English should move closer to the realities of modern living. Indeed, the English programs are under revision in all provinces, and among significant developments are (1) the attempt to relate all aspects of language study, (2) the recommendation that teachers choose from a variety of textbooks to plan courses appropriate to their classes and that they extend the range of supplementary reading materials, (3) the use of the mass media, and (4) a new attitude toward examinations. However, many statements in the various curriculums imprison the teacher in the "old system" rather than inspire him to explore language. Furthermore, historical linguistics is rarely given adequate attention, and teachers are not sufficiently encouraged to keep up-to-date with progress in their profession. (JS)

the English quarterly

A Publication of the *Canadian Council of Teachers of English*

Vol. 1 , No.1 Summer, 1968

Knowledge of the origins, development, and the nature of our language are as important for the educated man as a knowledge of history, geography, or physics. In some ways it is more important since language is of greater day-to-day relevance to the individual than any of these other disciplines. (John C. Gerber, "Explosion in English", *NCTE 1967 Distinguished Lectures).*

Directions in Language

J. Neufeld

During the past year I had the opportunity, while on sabbatical leave, to examine current English curricula of the ten Canadian provinces. My particular study was the language programs in the junior and senior secondary school, a study in which I sought to ascertain just how much these programs reflected contemporary language concepts and scholarship. Therefore, insofar as may be possible for one who until a few years ago was largely uninformed himself in these matters, I wish to comment on what I found.

One of the most enlightened statements is found in the language program of one of our smaller provinces:

Most current thinking about English curriculum and English teaching represents an attempt in some form to bring the teaching of English closer to the realities of modern living. This, in itself, is both logical and laudable. If we truly believe in an education which is designed to promote the full development of the individual, it is essential that English teaching, which touches the individual at so many points of his personality, should strive to maintain a contact with the inner and outer life of every student . . .

What such a view does require, however, is that teachers understand language for what it is—not an academic study, closeted in a library, defined in a textbook, or prescribed in the do's and don'ts of an English lesson, but a living, changing, infinitely-varied expression of the individual and collective human personality.

Flexibility and adaptability, however, while it must be recognized as a major characteristic of the English language, does not supply a

standard on which a teacher may either base instruction in usage or develop linguistic and literary discrimination. Some uses of language are clearly regressive; prophets of the decline and doom of our language are almost as numerous as prophets of the decline and doom of our civilization—and the more perceptive recognize that the fate of both is irrevocably linked. Most teachers are presumably more optimistic—otherwise they would not be teaching—but it would be an unreal and perhaps dangerous kind of optimism which ignored language as it exists today or which was unprepared to test in the present the linguistic concepts and practices, and the literary precepts and values, of the past.[1]

The English programs are under revision in all provinces. But writing a new curriculum is a long, arduous, and sometimes thankless task, demanding perseverance and courage as well as sound scholarship. Furthermore, curriculum committees expose themselves to criticism from the powers that be, from the public, and not infrequently from a large segment of teachers, particularly those who over the years have accumulated a hoard of neatly-filed teaching materials, work sheets, and quizzes in "deep-freeze" readily available for "instant lessons". I know. I have probably been one of the worst offenders. Because of this almost infinite capacity of inertia and prejudice, so deep-seated in us all, "changing a curriculum is almost as difficult as moving a cemetery."

Yet the change is taking place. How far it will be carried remains to be seen. But some significant developments are already emerging. There is a new and widespread attempt to relate all aspects of language study. The more informed programs also recommend that the teacher choose from a variety of texts to build a course appropriate for his class. There is also more freedom for the student. The range of supplementary reading material is being considerably extended, and paperbacks are gaining wide acceptance in the classroom. In order that students may have "free reading" periods at least once a week, several curriculum committees strongly recommend a relaxation of time tables.

Other developments are also noteworthy. Several curricula encourage the student to explore the world of language beyond the textbook and invite him to listen critically (one of our large provinces adds the word "skeptically") to varieties of language heard on radio and television. Two or three provinces suggest in detail how various types of mass media may be studied as "generative" units. Although the film has been used for decades as a teaching device in our schools, the study of its nature and of its impact upon our society is recent, and adds new dimensions to the "English" class.

The attitude to examinations is changing. In the light of today's informed understanding of language, traditional methods of examining student progress have become highly suspect. Alternatives are already being implemented. One or two provinces recommend the complete abolition of examinations, especially June examinations, as the basis for promotion. Instead, they urge that a student's standing be determined by carefully-planned day-to-day learning, as well as by periodic assignments. Two provinces have already eliminated their senior matriculation examinations, and others are considering taking the same step. Obviously this phasing out of final examinations

involves administrative problems and a new look at the professionalism of teachers. In Saskatchewan, for example, teachers given this responsibility and power must qualify by attending a two-week seminar.

Although the writing of adequate curricula is of prime importance, the selection of appropriate texts is a matter of equal concern. Informed curriculum committees would agree that "the service which a textbook can perform in the teaching of English is strictly limited," and that it is important "to select textbooks by authors . . . who are generally free from pedantry, and subscribe to an inductive rather than a prescriptive approach . . . to help promote the climate of honest, critical inquiry." The last phrase, it seems to me, is the significant one. Even though books of this calibre are in short supply, enough are available to reflect contemporary thought. Unfortunately, there are still many authorized language texts that perpetuate eighteenth-century concepts, neither accurate nor valid. No matter how sincere the motive that prompts the selection of such books, curriculum committees should be skeptical enough to scrutinize texts that claim to be "creative", "modern", "alive". "Revised" texts especially should be closely examined. It would be a simple matter to list here a dozen books of this kind, still used with the full approval of some provincial authorities. There are programs that plead for an integration of all aspects of language study but sanction the use of texts that only fragment such study by treating spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and the like, in the manner of eighteenth-century grammarians. A modern date of publication does not guarantee modern attitudes based on up-to-date scholarship. Better no text than one that serves the student so inadequately.

But what about the inexperienced teacher who finds in his curriculum, supposedly the ultimate resource for wise counsel, statements as confusing as these:

The study of grammar must make a contribution to the development of improved oral and written expression, or it fails in its purpose.

Grammar should be made real to students, and can be made pleasant; but the pupils have to realize that the rules of grammar, pleasant or not, must be learned; and these rules of language they must abide by, even as they learn to follow the rules of a game. As with a game, the happy results of learning rules will soon be apparent —a new mastery of technique, and the pleasure that comes from achievement.

The teacher must teach grammar functionally, and to meet the needs of the particular students concerned. Correctness in punctuation, use of capitals, grammatical forms, must be insisted upon in a final revision of all written work—and use of common errors as a means of showing why.

Prescriptive grammar should be taught only as a means of understanding the structure of the language, and the relationship between structure and purpose. The newer developments in descriptive grammar should be studied as they illuminate the various uses of language.

The above texts make good reference books but poor pupils. Remember to teach the pupil and not the book—be imaginative and strive for effect.

Pupils have been exposed already to too much grammar and punctuation before reaching Grade IX; and, therefore, it is necessary to camouflage the teaching of these topics in the art of good writing. They are like bitter medicine, only to be swallowed in a palatable mixture. A good teacher will accomplish this. Grammar and punctuation are not an end in themselves, but rather serve as a particular cure for the ills of writing. See that they do just that.

Not much help here, to be sure. No wonder that the teacher working with this kind of guidance becomes bewildered. No room in such statements for inquiry; teacher and student are incarcerated in an old system from which there is no escape. How much more helpful are the programs reflecting contemporary knowledge and attitudes:

There is abundant evidence to indicate that the isolated study of grammar does not necessarily result in better speaking and writing.[3]

If grammar is to be a part of the program, use the principles of modern grammar developed by linguists rather than the vague definitions and prescriptions . . . If a teacher has not developed some understanding of modern linguistics he is advised to omit a formal study of grammar from his program, rather than spend class time on the so-called "traditional" grammar, because it is an inadequate and inaccurate description of the language. It holds little interest for students, and it has been shown to have a negligible effect upon one's ability to use his language.[3]

There is a lack of convincing evidence that the formal and descriptive study of grammar of any type will measurably increase the ability of young people to write better, although it is conceded that a knowledge of grammar may help more mature writers to perfect their styles.[4]

These stimulate a teacher's desire to explore language, to move with interest into any avenue that will enhance his understanding, and help him to treat the facts of language not as "camouflage" but with integrity.

In this context I wish to elaborate briefly on the place that the history of the English language holds in Canadian language programs. Only in two or three programs is historical linguistics given due attention. Most prescribed texts, still strongly oriented to the dream world of eighteenth-century concepts, are of little value here. True, a capsule history may be found in one or two, but treated largely in isolation. In the few modern texts available, language history opens promising avenues for the exploration of many facets of language. It should be apparent to every serious teacher of English that the history of language. far from being merely a branch to be included or ignored at will, is the root from which all aspects of language draw their vitality. Consider the following informed comment found in one curriculum:

A deeper understanding of the nature of our language can be achieved if the historical approach is used to illuminate our study of the dictionary, of grammar, of usage, of style; in fact, of all aspects of language study. An historical dimension to the study of language should help students to see English as an important part of their culture, rather than as a series of repetitive and seemingly unrelated exercises in mechanics, spelling, and paragraph writing.[5]

Curriculum guides could also, I believe, provide valuable help to teachers in other ways. I have noticed, for example, that only one province draws specific attention to the *English Journal*, one of the best sources of information in periodicals. More care might well go into the selection of reference reading. Bibliographies too often seem "padded" with a host of titles, many of them out-dated. In fact, while most titles include publishers' names, few list the dates of publication. Much the same can be said about dictionaries: all programs stress the importance of the dictionary, but only one or two emphasize the need for comprehensive, *recent* dictionaries. Yet it is important that English teachers discard the eighteenth-century attitude of "Look is up in *the* dictionary"—as if all dictionaries were alike, and any dictionary is a final, infallible authority on the complex problem of usage.

In the transition from traditional to contemporary language programs, there is bound to be a confusion in terminology. For example, "the function of grammar" and "teaching grammar functionally" are two entirely different concepts, the latter term emerging in the 40's and since found invalid. Other terms are "formal grammar", "structure of the sentence", "usage", "sentence patterns", not to mention the definitions of parts of speech, of sentences, and the like. To take the necessary steps to extricate himself as much as possible from this confusion, the teacher needs courage and knowledge. After the day's conventional responsibilities, the teacher does not find much time to read, to attend seminars and other in-service training; it is not easy, after wrestling for ten months with myriads of professional responsibilities, to enroll in summer school classes. Nevertheless, there seems to be no other way; it is the teacher's professional obligation to keep up-to-date. Fortunate indeed is the teacher whose department head, principal, or superintendent is sufficiently informed to help by giving encouragement and direction.

The foregoing critical remarks seem to have been largely negative, but they reflect my thoughts during these months of study. I stated earlier that all provinces are making extensive revisions in their English programs. From most curriculum directors come encouraging indications that the new programs will be based on new and more accurate language concepts. The following are excerpts from letters recently written to me by provincial curriculum directors:

We are working on a new series of textbooks, . . . which will give attention to historical linguistics.

At the present time a pilot program is being conducted in five high schools in grades 11 and 12 . . . For some time the Department has given consideration to the place of linguistics or transitional materials in teaching language usage and language description.

This trend will continue as we move forward into newer and, we hope, stronger programs which will emphasize linguistic research. We find that the present programs at the senior high school levels will have to be revised again as those children who have worked in the new 7 - 9 programs advance to secondary levels.

The teaching of linguistics has been touched on in the secondary schools, but there has been no serious attempt to introduce it as a serious study. Prescriptive grammar, however, is less popular than it was.

There is a course which is intended to be an experiment in the linguistic approach to teaching language.

At this time we do not know what program we will be adopting, but we trust that it will be one of the modern ones.

Developments in linguistics are reflected to some extent in the guides and in the textbooks.

The courses we are looking for in English language will reduce the emphasis formerly placed on formal grammar, and place a corresponding emphasis on the structure of English.

This March several hundred teachers gathered for a conference in Toronto. Their theme: *The New Sounds of English.* Regional groups in many areas of Ontario are conducting week-end seminars and in-service training, and in several instances regularly. Much the same is taking place in other provinces. This movement by the teachers themselves is a healthy trend. New Brunswick's curriculum, quoted in part on the first page, concludes:

One of the most encouraging signs . . . is the increasing willingness of teachers to come together and discuss the major issues and problems involved in the teaching of English. It is surely out of such meeting, conducted in a spirit of mutual tolerance and respect, that the best hope for "better" English teaching may come.[6]

References

1. Bryan Roberts, *Program of Studies for English Senior High Schools* (Department of Education Curriculum and Research Branch, Fredericton, N.B., September, 1968.)
2. *Junior High School Curriculum Guide for Language* (Department of Education, Edmonton, Alberta, June, 1967.)
3. *Senior High School Curriculum Guide* (Department of Education, Province of Alberta, 1967.)
4. *Junior Secondary School* (Province of British Columbia Department of Education, Division of Curriculum, Victoria, 1965.)
5. Ibid.
6. Op. cit.