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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS LANGUAGE REFLECTION

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Introduction

There has been much attention given recently to the idea of metacognition (Brown, 1980) and metalinguistic awareness or metalanguage (Yaden & Templeton, 1986). Reflecting on the thinking process and communication are critical elements in understanding language processes.

Reflective thinking has also been addressed (Dewey, 1933). Wedman and Martin (1986) advocate the use of reflective journal writing to give preservice teachers the opportunity to reflect upon observations and theoretical constructs in terms of meaningful practice. The type of writing which ". . . allows for the possibility of thinking about the relationship between self and institution, theory and practice, and daily routines and teaching effectiveness. In short, the process of writing serves as the technology for developing reflectivity" (Wedman & Martin, 1986, p. 69).

Often, preservice teachers need to be reminded of the many influences on children's language. By reflecting on their own past language experiences, perhaps prospective teachers can better examine the important elements for language development.

As an assignment for my undergraduate education students, they wrote a modified autobiography about the literacy experiences which may have affected their language development. Students were familiar with the theories of language acquisition and the factors influencing language. I wanted students to have the opportunity to reflect upon these factors in their own lives, to

get them to think reflectively on their past experiences and how they affect language. The following excerpts from their papers serve as examples of the influences these students believed to be important in their own lives:

"As a toddler I was constantly after my mom's numerous magazines that she faithfully subscribed to . . . I'm not quite sure if I loved tearing and chewing on the pages, but this was definitely a first 'taste' of the written language."

"All I needed was a box of colored chalk, a stack of papers, and imaginary pupils, and I could play for hours. Pretending to be a teacher expanded my written and spoken language. Writing on the chalkboard and using old elementary texts augmented my writing abilities by introducing me to school words. I also pretended that I was speaking to a classroom of students, so I used my oral language to present the lessons."

"Grandpa told the best stories. They were usually set down in 'Deep Dark Holler.' He called them 'bear tales.' Sometimes he would start the stories, 'Once upon a time when I was a little girl---' and for a long time I believed Grandpa had been a little girl when he was my age!"

Surely early experiences with print are an important factor in language development. Children need to see print and hear it read to them to grow linguistically.

The impact that "playing school" and storytelling have on language development and practice are very real. Imaginative and interactional language uses (Halliday, 1975) expand language experiences.

Upper Elementary Experiences

Self-confidence is an important factor as children gain independence and deal more with peer pressure. Some students noted embarrassing experiences:

". . . the teacher asked for a volunteer to copy a story down to be run off for the class. I volunteered and Miss ----- said, '...we all know you can't write well!' I was so crushed and to this day I still remember that moment vividly."

Certainly good literature is a critical element of language development. How students choose to respond to literature is an individual matter.

"One book that got me into trouble was Harriet the Spy. I am talking about my parents sitting down with me telling me how I could not go around spying on people because it was an invasion on one's privacy!"

Many students noted the positive effects of having an upper elementary teacher who read to them and sparked their interest in good literature.

Slang words are a natural social factor of a dynamic communication system. Many students noted their experience with slang as they used language to interact with their peers.

"I went through the 'Duh' stage in sixth grade and also the 'If you love it why don't you marry it?' stage. 'Doy' was another . . . We thought we were so great, but I bet we drove everyone crazy."

Slang words are evidence that language changes just as society and people change. Slang is an example of language interaction between friends and peers in informal situations.

Junior High--The Awkward Stage

Junior High may be a turning point of sorts for students as they learn to get along with new friends and begin to question things they don't understand.

"As a result of consolidation . . . I had to ride a but ten miles every day. . . so I learned some interesting things . . . how to write backwards on a window so people can read it from the outside."

"I read a lot of Harlequin romances and science fiction books in junior high. I was a very inquisitive person. I carried around a small notebook of questions that I wanted to know the answers to."

Studying a foreign language can also be an aid to understanding the English language. By learning a different language, some students gained a new appreciation for their native language:

"To acquire another language, I used my knowledge of English to help me. How complicated! I had never sat down and thought about how difficult and extremely complex English really is. Learning German both expanded my knowledge and vocabulary and brought some interesting yet startling observations of the English language to my mind."

Being exposed to various regional dialects adds to language awareness. Words and expressions vary from region to region and are evidence of geographical language differences.

". . . in Massachusetts, I went into an ice cream store and ordered, and the clerk asked me if I would like 'Jimmies' on my ice cream. I was at a total loss as to what 'Jimmies' were. I turned to my friend who tried to help me by using a term from Rhode Island. 'You know, ants,' he said, 'I don't want ants on my ice cream!' The clerk showed me what she meant--chocolate sprinkles."

Marriage might also have an impact on the social nature of language. Language is used in a casual setting with a familiar person.

"I'm fascinated by the vast knowledge of words my husband has. He's taught me much of the slang from the streets that I was totally unaware of, as well as different aspects of cars, motorcycles, well-drilling, mail production, and the Viet Nam War."

How a teacher shares himself/herself is also representative of language. A teacher who is willing to share him or herself and take risks is apt to reap the benefits of a classroom of comfortable interaction. One high school teacher who was working on recertification wrote this about her own classroom: "I like to create a friendly atmosphere in the class. I think that in order to do that you have to take the risk of talking about yourself a little bit for students to get to know you. Chances are they will open up and talk about themselves also."

Many students summarized their life experiences in this way: "I feel lucky to have had so many experiences

with different people and different places. These experiences have definitely enhanced my language development . . . which I realize now, is indeed dynamic and continuous. I now see the powerful influence each of my own teachers had on me."

Conclusions

The factors influencing language development are varied and yet consistent. As students reflected upon their own unique experiences, they were reminded of the critical factors surrounding language development and use. As prospective teachers, they thought reflectively about language as a function and byproduct of the social nature of school and beyond. Further, they began to think about how they might incorporate positive language elements into their own classrooms, by reading aloud to students, providing creative drama opportunities, discussing language change and diversity (sland and dialects), enhancing self-esteem, and taking risks as teachers by talking more about themselves to set a comfortable classroom tone. Writing about these experiences and future plans helped the students to develop their own abilities to be reflective and to think critically about language development factors within a meaningful context.
