

4-1-1979

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### Recommended Citation

Buelke, E. (1979). Worlds of Language within the Classroom. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 19 (3). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol19/iss3/3](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol19/iss3/3)

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# WORLDS OF LANGUAGE WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

*Eleanor Buelke*

Many present-day writers who have studied interdisciplinary approaches to mental health and efficient living and learning have presented irrefutable evidence of strong links among thought, language, and a rational grasp of the real world. They believe that successful venture into the world and stable viability within it depend upon the use of language to establish personal verification of reality. Denial or restriction of a child's language in the learning process is considered disavowal or restraint in the assimilation of enriching experiences. The ability of young learners to think symbolically becomes a prerequisite for true language learning, including the mastery of reading and writing. During the growth of a normal, healthy individual, from active transactions with environmental features and persons toward persistent, independent, cognitive strategies for organization of experience, language assumes an ever more central role in the processes for learning. The artful, skillful teacher, then, is one who recognizes and maximizes the worlds of language within the classroom.

Within a typical classroom, categorical, operant worlds of language may be observed and utilized for learning. *The child's world of language* derives originally, in face-to-face encounters, from what might be considered nonlinguistic features, such as facial expression, eye contact, posture, and gestures. This is extended to include stress, intonation, and inflections, without much regard to referential verbal meaning. Recognition of these factors occurs under conditions of reciprocity and constitutes first forms of the "expressive mode" of language usage.<sup>1</sup> As expressive talk becomes increasingly a vehicle for shared experience, it maintains its characteristically relaxed, self-revealing, narrative nature, but becomes part of a larger goal, that of understanding the experienced event, or feeling. Thus, individuals not only "represent" the encounter, but, also, ascribe meaning to it with their language.

Early in the child's life, language usage of all kinds is closely attached to immediate action. Later on, young language-learners adopt more of a "spectator roles."<sup>2</sup> As this role is extended and its function is refined, language becomes more an ordering of experience for personal meaning. Narration becomes secondary to the importance of conveying this meaning to others. Ensuing language development enables children to move on to more objective modes. At this point, they are capable of incorporating symbols of both direct experience and spectator experience into their

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur N. Applebee, *The Child's Concept of Story*, p. 6. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 30.

representations. Both ways of knowing remain closely linked, with new individual knowledge being assimilated and accommodated into a larger social context. Only through a sequential, gradual process do learners come to recognize alternative views of the world with a free and open acceptance. Good communication between teachers and learners, built upon teachers' perceptive sensitivity to patterns of growth and appreciative assessment in the areas of language development, can make this happen.

In addition to such appreciative, sensitive awareness, the *adult's world of language* in the classroom encompasses a number of specialized skills. Included are language competencies involved in knowing the difference between expository writing and literature; understanding the symbolic representation inherent in the arts; being able to test ideas against realities; using varied cognitive levels of questioning for inquiry and clarification; and appropriately evaluating ideational and creative language. Trends toward reliance upon prescribed instructional materials adopted by a school system as a total reading and language program signal an urgent need for teachers, themselves, to initiate their own development of language expertise, building increased language power to use and share with children.

The meaning of the *child's world of language* and the *adult's world of language* constitutes a very real *classroom world of shared language power*. When used appropriately, the child's language expands knowledge, furthers quick disposal of routine matters, facilitates communication, contributes to cooperative relationships, solves problems, becomes a means for appreciation of others and enhancement of self, and expresses individual creativity. Used inappropriately, it can serve to denigrate learning, or others; to confuse others' thinking; to destroy faith, trust, and friendly feelings; to avoid getting involved; or to restrict/restrain creative expression. It is the responsibility of the adult, the teachers, to promote the positive power of children's language. Teachers who *care* are teachers who *share* their language power. Some ways of doing this are by:

1. Structuring real learning experiences, where both cognitive and affective knowing are accompanied by discussion/verbal interaction;
2. Making opportunities for expanding ideation through creative writing, imaginative as well as expository in nature;
3. Skillful, open-ended, value-oriented questioning, requiring responses using varying degrees of abstraction;
4. Involving children in planning for instruction and evaluation;
5. Confronting children often with challenges and questions, permitting them time to search for answers, and to follow up on hunches;
6. Introducing alternatives, and clarifying issues raised;
7. Presenting/exploring information in a way that involves children in simultaneous, silent thinking, using class response to explain and summarize as needed; and
8. Stimulating hypothesizing, and demonstrating expert search techniques for finding the truth.

Through use of strategies like these, shared control of classroom language power is shared responsibility for expanding competence in the language process. Increased power is generated for reading, communicating, and thinking together, power for the individual to use to control his own fate in the world.

Whether the individual has a rich, sensuously rewarding world with wide horizons and dynamic and stimulating relationships with it, or a colorless, dwarfed world depends to a large degree on whether language growth is confirmed, enriched, encouraged, and whether the individual is able to reach out and extend himself into the world through language.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>E. Brooks Smith, Kenneth S. Goodman, and Robert Meredith, *Language and Thinking in School*, p. 8. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.