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Literacy in Perspective.

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LITERACY IN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

One aim of this Joint National Conference of the Australian Reading Association and the Australian Association of Teachers of English is to develop a National Literacy Policy. An essential pre-requisite to developing a policy on literacy is a definition of the term "literacy".

This paper argues that if this definition is stated in general terms it will be of questionable value, as it will be open to multiple interpretations dependent on the context.

To assist the processes of defining literacy and of developing a national policy this paper will:

1. consider dictionary definitions and current usage of the term "literacy";

2. examine the claim that standards of literacy have declined;

3. propose that there are numerous of aspects of literacy and that these aspects are of concern to different groups in the community;

4. examine the process of language development, including:

   a. the role of the home, the school and wider community in this development; and

   b. the economic, technological and social changes which have been affecting both the out-of-school and school environment;

5. consider the nature of language; and examine the expectations various groups have of secondary schools in the development of language usage.

In discussing this area the following aspects will be considered:

a. why some young people don't come up to the standards expected of them;

b. what schools, and in particular English teachers, are doing about this problem; and

c. what other people (examiners, employers and academics) can learn from what the schools are doing.

INTRODUCTION

Schools of Teacher Education share the concern of tertiary institutions generally, schools and the wider community about the literacy standards of young people. In particular, the concern of teacher educators is how well prospective teachers are being prepared to be teachers of literacy. The debates about teacher preparation and literacy generally are continuing and confusing, not least because literacy is a word that means different things to different people.

In an endeavour to help clarify issues for debate in 1990 (The International Year of Literacy) the Australian Reading Association and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English held a National Literacy Symposium in June-July 1989.

The purpose of the paper 'Literacy in Perspective', which was initially presented to the symposium, is to inform as wide an audience as possible that literacy is a complex issue. Despite this complexity, the paper argues that there are actions that teacher educators and academics generally, teachers, employers, parents and employees can take that will lead to improvements in literacy.

Schools of Teacher Education need to consider carefully what they do to:

1. improve the literacy standards of prospective teachers; and

2. prepare prospective teachers so that they may help develop the language competencies of the children they teach.

Literacy is a dangerous term because it means different things to different people even though the dictionary definitions seem quite simple.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines "literacy" as "the state of being literate: possession of an education" and defines "literate" as being "able to read and write; having an education" while the *Concise Oxford* defines literacy as the "ability to read and write". In both cases the lexicographers have wisely avoided trying to define how well literate persons should be able to read or write, or how well educated they should be. It is this matter of degree that is the central problem that bedevils any discussion of literacy.

Before entering into the labyrinth that the word "literacy" creates, it is wise to remind ourselves that the term is used more widely, more figuratively than the Oxford dictionary definition suggests, to define competence in a wide range of areas. Computer experts talk of people being computer literate; politicians express concern at the level of political literacy of the electorate (and perhaps should be thankful that the electorate isn't more politically literate); art and media people speak of visual and media literacy; and physical educationists of physical literacy.

While acknowledging that there is a wide range of literacies, this paper will limit itself to the literacies associated with language. In doing so there are still a number of aspects which merit a brief comment before focusing on literacy as a contemporary issue.

At different times in history literacy has meant different things: from the most rudimentary skills, that is people being able to sign their names, to the more complex demands made by today's society. This paper is not concerned with providing an historical coverage of the meaning of the term except that it rejects any notion that there was once a golden age of literacy. This myth of a golden age is one which is held by many who criticise the literacy standards of today's young people. In making this comment I hasten to add that I, too, am concerned about, and have been critical of, the literacy standards of many young people.

As chairperson of the W.A. Tertiary Entrance Examination Panel in English for 1986-88, I have been party to comments in examiners' reports which have expressed concern about the poor reading and writing displayed by many candidates. In making these observations the examining panel have been aware that examiners, for decades, have been expressing similar concerns.

A brief survey of W.A. examiners' reports for the year 1950 showed that examiners across a range of subjects at the Junior certificate level (Year 10) and Leaving Certificate level (Year 12) were as concerned then as examiners are now.

The Junior Geography examiner expressed concern that "spelling is still weak, even in some of the better papers" while the Junior Physiology and Hygiene examiner lamented that "the spelling was completely awful. I have never met worse".

The Leaving English examiners commented that:

> Throughout the papers examiners have found less slovenliness in writing than in some previous years. None the less they cannot help noticing a general inadequacy in punctuation. In about half the essays the paragraphing was fair; in the other half below standard. Hardly one candidate in twenty uses question marks and exclamation marks. Semi-colons, colons and brackets never seem to be used at all.

Commendably the examiners stated that "more important than these mechanical defects" was a concern about that students had to say and how they said it. In commenting on the examination cohort of 848 candidates they said: "The tail is still long, and the mediocre student when compelled to think for himself flounders badly". This point is further emphasised in a delightful comment: "many students were further handicapped by a disabling lack of information bearing upon the topic they had chosen to discuss".

Such comments were made about an examination cohort that was less than 10% of the Year 12 age group of the state's population.

The 1950s are an appropriate period for comparison as many of the critics of today's young people were students in that decade. It is useful to be able to demonstrate to them that their assertions about the standards which prevailed then were not shared by the examiners of the time.

While it is easy to refute a claimed decline in literacy standards by demonstrating the concerns of examiners of earlier times, it is vital that we acknowledge there is a widespread community concern about current standards. There is no shortage of people willing to voice this concern and they can be guaranteed wide media coverage if they are willing to blame secondary English teachers and/or primary teachers.

Such teachers rightly object to being labelled as scapegoats when they, too, are concerned about the issue and their concern is evident in the profile that literacy has in this First Joint National Conference of the Australian Reading Association and Australian Association for the Teaching of English.

TOWARDS A DEFINITION

Even when the term "literacy" is limited to aspects related to language it is still an ambiguous term. This is mainly because so many of the definitions see language purely as a communication tool and ignore the relationship that exists between language and thinking. An understanding of this relationship is essential to any attempt to define literacy. Sean Monahan (1986), in a paper prepared for the Western Australian Secondary Education Authority, provided an illustration of this point:

> There is not one literacy but many. Failure to acknowledge that fact bedevils attempts to find solutions that are educationally sound rather than simply politically expedient. A recent case in the WA College illustrates the point. A student who was praised for her style in one course was castigated in another for writing illiterate essays. Investigation proved both praise and blame were well founded.

> In the first course the student was writing on topics of her own choice within a non-specialist vocabulary and dealing with concepts she fully understood. These essays were well organised, with deft use of sentence structure, effective choice of vocabulary and few mechanical errors. In the second course the student was struggling to come to terms with the methods and terminology of a new academic discipline and produced work that was full of crude sentence structure errors, inappropriate use of vocabulary and confused argument. In one "literacy" the student was well above average; in the other she was sub-standard. To try to help such a student to improve her "literacy" without first deciding "which literacy" is to risk teaching her the literacy she has already acquired rather than the literacy she now needs. (Monahan 1986).

From this example it is obvious that different literacy demands are being made in different disciplines. It becomes clear then that it is essential that we distinguish the different aspects of literacy which are of interest to three significant concerned groups in our community: parents, employers and academics. The aspects outlined below are a development of a three-level view of literacy (basic, business and tertiary studies) originally proposed in 1986 in the above-mentioned paper by Sean Monahan.

Literacy for Everyday Living

This is the basic literacy expected of all adults in our society.

It involves being able to:

1. spell and punctuate in accordance with the conventions of English usage;

2. express one's own ideas in sentences and paragraphs which conform to accepted conventions;

3. write personal letters and a limited range of business letters such as letters of application for employment; and

4. comprehend straightforward prose.

This aspect of literacy is the foundation on which other aspects are built and it is developed through the school and home.

Deficiency in this aspect of literacy is of concern to parents - and teachers.

Vocational Literacies

Vocational Literacies include the Literacy for Everyday Living. Different vocations may make some specific demands but there are a number of competencies which would be common to many of them. These include the ability to:

1. deal with complex forms;
2. write effective memoranda and business letters;
3. write succinct summaries;
4. read effectively a range of text material.

Competence in these language tasks does not just happen. It is more rapidly developed when employers acknowledge the need for training and guidance to build on skills acquired by employees in secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

Deficiency in this aspect of literacy is of concern to employers, be they big firms, small business or government departments.

The Literacies of Tertiary Studies

This is not one but many literacies which all include the Literacy for Everyday Living. Each academic discipline has its own specialist vocabulary and preferred modes of argument and presentation. To be successful in tertiary studies students need to be able to be effective and critical readers of a range of texts and competent writers in the preferred modes of each discipline. While the essay form is generic to much of the writing at this level there are substantial differences between the types of essays preferred by different disciplines.

Extensive citing from secondary sources is required in some disciplines and deprecated in others. Words acquire precise connotations in different disciplines and this subject-specific vocabulary is only assimilated through discussion and reading.

Competence in any one subject literacy is acquired over time, and competence in one subject literacy does not guarantee competence in another.

Deficiency in these subject specific literacies is of concern to university and college lecturers.

These aspects of literacy are obviously not discrete categories. Looking at literacy in this way, however, facilitates our understanding of what the term means when it is used by members of three influential groups in the community. Having outlined the aspects of language usage which are of concern to these groups it is appropriate to look at the process of language development before considering who should be responsible for teaching these different aspects.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT : THE PARENTS' ROLE IN A CHANGING WORLD

The home, the school and the wider community all contribute significantly to a child's language development and, as much of this occurs in the first five years of life, the quality of the home environment is a crucial element in this development.

Children learn language through use: through interacting with people and things around them. Traditionally, the people who provide the models for this early language development are the parents, grandparents and older siblings. Children fortunate enough to be born into families which enjoy language and who have adults who speak to them, read to them, and who encourage them to talk, develop competence in oral language and a love of books as a source of fun, stories and information. Such a positive attitude to books underpins their learning to read and write when they enter school. Such children learn quickly and discover that through reading and writing they learn.

During their years at primary school their reading and writing skills develop. What is too little understood, however, is that the consolidation of these skills outside school hours is at least as important as what happens in schools. The children who read and write in their leisure time are the children who become highly competent in written language.

Changes in the out-of-school environment and the erosion of leisure-time reading have detrimentally affected the language development of many young people. It is important to consider briefly some of these changes so that older generations do not rush to questionable conclusions as to the causes of poor language competence.

The pace of life is much faster in the 1980s than the 1950s. The number of activities competing for time, particularly those of a social nature, tend to squeeze out solitary leisure activities such as reading. The affluence and mobility of contemporary society mean that many children are involved in more organised activities than was once the case. Indeed, parents frequently complain about being part-time chauffeurs.

Growth in the mass media is another significant factor in the lives of young people. In pre-television days, newspapers and magazines were found in most homes as they were the main source of news and light leisure reading. Children saw parents reading and parents naturally shared aspects of their reading with their children.

The scene today is different. Many homes do not get newspapers or magazines and the television set is turned on from morning to night. This reduction in the availability of newspapers as a resource for reading has been accompanied by a general decline in their quality. So the young people who have access to papers are exposed to poorer models of written English than those available to earlier generations.

Television used well is an immensely valuable aid to learning. Used unwisely it is unquestionable an impediment, particularly to language learning. It is an impediment as it is essentially a passive listening activity and there is little language interaction with adults while it is being viewed.

Language is learned through use, through the interactions of all modes of language - speaking, listening, reading and writing - and television viewing inhibits this interaction. Furthermore, extensive viewing inevitably means limited time is available for reading and this limited exposure to models of written language means writing and spelling are affected as well.

The impact of television on the lives of young people can most clearly be seen through the hours they spend watching. A national survey, some years ago, revealed that, on average, Australian children watched thirty-five hours of television a week. It would appear from these figures that many parents are unaware of the effect such extended viewing will have on the development of

the children's language skills, particularly reading and writing. Of particular concern to teachers are the children from otherwise limited language environments who watch excessive hours of television.

The hours spent watching the screen have probably further increased in recent years through the widespread ownership of videorecorders. They invite use by young people for the playing of off-air recordings, pre-recorded material and games. Further screen games are available to many young people through personal computers. As the games are highly attractive, they provide formidable competition for the precious few hours available for other leisure-time activities including reading.

Apart from television, videorecorders and personal computers there have been other technological developments which have contributed to the decline of written language in children's everyday lives: the use of letters has declined and telegrams have disappeared as the telephone has become more readily available and cheaper to use; while the change from letterpress to offset printing ha meant that visual aspects (photographs, illustrations) dominate the presentation of items from news stories to advertisements in many newspapers and magazines.

The increasing importance of the mass media in our lives and the significance of the visual element in their communication are the reasons why may adults argue that visual literacy is at least as important as linguistic literacy for young people. It is the reason why media studies have been incorporated in English curricula and why "performing" and "viewing" are now included with speaking, listening, reading and writing among the objectives of such courses.

The challenge for school and home is that society is now demanding that young people be both linguistically and visually literate at a higher level than was the case for earlier generations.

As well as the economic and technological changes there have been social changes which have contributed to the reduction of time available for children to share oral and written language experiences with parents. The increase in single parent and two-working-parent families has limited the time that many, but not all, such parents have available to talk with, and read to, their children. What is of crucial importance is the quality of the parenting. Many parents understand how important these language experiences are in laying the foundation for later academic success. Others, sadly, are unaware of the importance of them, or simply fail to give them the priority they deserve.

Concern about the limited reading of many older students was the reason why in 1985-86 groups of teachers, librarians and academics in three states (New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia) combined in a project to review a wide range of fiction and non-fiction works which are relevant to adolescents. The three volumes of *Access to Books*, should be published in 1989 and they provide adult and adolescent reviews of over one thousand titles.

They should assist teachers and librarians to help students choose books of interest to them.

Schools have responded to the changing out-of-school scene by introducing "sustained silent reading" periods. Teachers have recognised the need to compensate for students' impoverished reading backgrounds by making time available during the school day for them to practise this important skill. There is, however, a limit to how much can be achieved within school hours.

Adults, and children, readily accept that to improve performance in a sport or on a musical instrument it is necessary to practise and to seek the advice of people competent in the field. It is less readily understood that to improve language skills the same principles apply. Teachers may provide the expert advice but without students practising the skills there will be little improvement.

If parents are interested in their children developing sporting and musical interests as leisure-time activities, they rarely assume that the school is responsible for both teaching and practice. It is surprising, therefore, that many adults consider the school is solely responsible for the development of children's literacy and numeracy - elements fundamental to the students' future well-being. At least it appears this way from the willingness of a wide range of adults to blame schools for the inadequacies of students.

Many of these adults, when invited to reflect on their school-age years, acknowledge that their language competence derives at least as much from the reading and writing practised out of school as from the language activities undertaken in school.

The influence of leisure-time reading as an influence on writing is evident to any adult who is competent in language. Students who are not readers write spoken English and invariably experience problems coping with the demands of different writing modes (essays, letters, reports) as well as the conventions of written English. Students who are good writers are invariably good readers, and good spellers are usually good readers (though not all good readers are good spellers).

Perhaps schools, for too long, have claimed the credit for much that happened outside school - though this has not been intentional. It is only as the world outside school has changed that we have come to understand the significance of such elements as leisure-time reading.

THE SCHOOL'S ROLE IN A CHANGING WORLD

Change has not been limited to the out-of-school environment. Schools, too, have experienced significant changes in the student population. In recent decades primary and secondary schools have had to cope with large numbers of students who come from non-English-speaking home environments. That

many of these students have developed competence in English and become successful in our society reveals what can be achieved when students have supportive parents and teachers.

The population of secondary schools has been significantly changed by the increased retention rate beyond the compulsory school age. For previous generations a wide range of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs was available for those who had limited success academically. Technology has eliminated many of these jobs so a greater number of young people now stay on till Year 11 and Year 12. Many of these students come from limited language backgrounds and they are applicants for jobs or courses in which their poor command of language quickly becomes apparent.

It is time for the community to recognise that the secondary school cannot miraculously transform such students. The biggest single challenge to teachers trying to improve the language competence of such students is to change their perception and attitudes.

The first eight years of children's lives are important, not just for the language development which is the basis of subsequent learning, but for the attitudes development. How children perceive themselves, their self-concept, becomes developed. How children perceive themselves, their self-concept, becomes perhaps the biggest single influence on subsequent learning. Children who enjoy language and are successful in the early stages of reading and writing are more likely to read and write in their own time. Children who are less successful in reading and writing are much more likely to avoid them whenever possible. This becomes even more marked when they sense that their efforts induce states of frustration, anxiety and disappointment in their parents and/or teachers. This response and a propensity to make comparative evaluations of children's performance by parents and teachers (to say nothing of children) influence the development of a negative self-concept. Children who develop a negative self-concept in terms of language become adept at minimising the amount of reading and writing that they do, because each encounter with written language is potentially painful.

The challenge for teachers is to get such students to see that it is, in the main, through practising reading and writing that they will improve their level of competence.

Not all is gloom, however. It is perhaps one of the great ironies of the current age that co-existing with these competing demands for children's time is a superb range of children's books. There has never been a richer age of children's books and they are available to children through a wide network of school and community libraries. The fact that so many good children's books are published indicates that there must be many librarians, teachers and parents who recognise the importance of introducing books to children. Likewise, personal computers when used for word processing are a boon for writing. They take the drudgery out of revising and re-writing work.

Many teachers believe that the influences outlined above are the reasons for the widening ability range they perceive in children entering and attending school. At one end of the continuum are children who come from family environments where language and learning are highly valued. Such children benefit from adults talking with them, from books, from television well used and from travel. At the other end of the continuum are the children who experience limited conversation with adults and whose homes are devoid of books and dominated by television. (The research of Professor Michael Liberman of Pennsylvania, recently reported in Australia [*The West Australian*, 3 September 1988], has highlighted how popular television programmes offer a limited language environment.) Such children are seriously disadvantaged in terms of language and knowledge and unless early progress is made tend to have limited success in their school careers.

Despite the evidence of many good practices in schools, there are frequent attacks on secondary schools by the media, parents, employers and academics. The language competence of secondary school leavers is of legitimate interest to these people but it is somewhat naive to single out Secondary English as the one aspect of student experience which is culpable for the perceived language deficiencies of such students.

THE LANGUAGE-THINKING NEXUS

Of the four language functions, two - writing and speaking - are concerned with the production of language; the other two, the reception of language. Critics of young people's language usage are invariably critical of their writing and speaking, and there are several reasons why it is these productive aspects, rather than the receptive aspects, of language which are the source of such criticism. Firstly, errors in production of language are more obvious, more tangible, than errors in reception because we cannot disguise inadequacies in writing and speaking as easily as we can disguise poor performance in reading and listening. There is, however, a more fundamental reason, a reason which explains why all people find the production of language more difficult than reception. It is the difficulty of matching words to ideas: the language-thinking nexus. This is a task which is so complex that no computer on earth can even approach it.

Many of those who criticise other people's use of language do not understand the complexity of the link between language and thought. They perceive language only as a communication tool. They believe that it is possible to teach the conventions of written English to students and that, once learned, these conventions can be applied to any writing task. It is because they perceive writing in these terms that, when they see errors in young people's writing, they assume that they have not been taught the conventions that apply to structure, usage, punctuation and spelling.

Such a view fails to take other important factors into account, however, such as the nature of the writing task, the audience for whom it is being written, and the writer's familiarity with the subject matter and the mode (essay, report or other modes) required. It is easy to demonstrate that many students write well and correctly when they are writing on topics and for purposes that they understand, in forms/modes with which they are familiar, and for audiences they know. These same writers are, however, capable of producing writing that lacks clarity and which is marred by errors of usage when they are extending their writing in new directions: when they are endeavouring to write on topics they do not understand, in modes with which they are unfamiliar and for an audience which is remote and unknown.

This phenomenon suggests that when a person's thinking is unclear, syntax, punctuation and spelling all disintegrate. Experienced, competent writers frequently have difficulty in writing papers in areas of their competence (this paper has not been easy to write) let alone on topics of which they have little knowledge. It is hardly surprising, then, that young, inexperienced writers have problems across a wide range of writing tasks.

English courses in secondary schools have changed over the last twenty-five years because our knowledge of the way people learn language has increased during this time. The understandings and insights gained from psycho-linguistic and socio-linguistic research outlined above and elsewhere are reflected in the various English syllabuses offered in Australian secondary schools.

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

There is widespread agreement that English courses should embrace three aspects of language. The first of these is **learning language** and covers the four language processes: speaking, listening, writing and reading. The second is **learning through language** and this involves the language-thinking nexus mentioned above. It is concerned with the clarifying, shaping and articulating of experiences and ideas which comes through the use of language. The third aspect, **learning about language**, looks at the organisation and structure of language; the way language changes when it is being used for different purposes and audiences; the different meanings and interpretations possible in different contexts; and the different levels and patterns of language usage that occur in Australian society. (Piper 1988: 19-45).

Syllabuses based on such understandings are concerned with developing language competence so that students are able to use language as a resource to make meaning, and to shape meaning, dependent on the context of the situation.

Soundly based English courses involve students in a range of oral language activities (one-to-one, small groups and more formal presentations) and require

them to write in a range of modes for different audiences and purposes. The expectation that students will strive to improve their mastery of the conventions of written English is integral to the writing programmes of such syllabuses. Indeed, professional English teachers have always accepted that it has been their responsibility to teach the conventions that apply to structure, usage, punctuation and spelling as part of the process of helping students to develop competence in writing. They believe, however, that it is essential to teach the conventions of usage in meaningful contexts, rather than through sets of exercises in isolation as was once the practice.

The more narrowly specific writing tasks such as particular essay forms which other subject areas demand, are properly the province of the teachers, secondary and tertiary, of these other disciplines. The role of English is to provide a basis from which these other writing tasks may develop.

LITERACY: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

While some teachers and academics in these disciplines have always recognised their responsibility to develop students' language competence in their subjects, others have ignored it. The latter attitude is simply poor teaching practice, as the ability to comprehend and express ideas is central to the understanding of any subject. Comprehension and expression include the vocabulary and terminology appropriate to the subject as well as writing in the modes and styles preferred by the discipline.

Over the last twenty or so years a number of enquiries into education in different parts of the world, including Bullock (UK) and Beazley (WA), have advocated the adoption of the policy of "language across the curriculum". Despite this, there has been a noticeable reluctance on the part of some subject teachers to accept responsibility for students' language development.

Such teachers claim they have not been trained to do this and that they do not possess the necessary knowledge to do it. This situation will be slow to change unless there are changes to some current practices. All tertiary entrance examiners should be required to give attention to expression when assessing candidates' performance - currently some ignore it. Secondly, all prospective secondary teachers should receive instruction in how to assist the development of their students' language usage during their professional training. There has been a marked reluctance to make provision for such instruction in teacher education courses as other subject interests vie for the course time available. Such attitudes must change and teacher education faculties need to include units in the teaching of reading and writing in courses for all prospective secondary teachers.

Given the current situation, the ideal of 'language across the curriculum' will be unrealisable in the immediate future. While this ideal may be unrealisable, it is not unrealistic to expect that all teachers in Australian secondary schools

accept responsibility for subject specific facets of language and insist that students use the conventions associated with Standard Australian English in their written work.

When there is consistency of expectation, students believe it is important to develop competence in such usage. If only a few teachers make this demand (while others accept, without comment or penalty, language that is colloquial, jargon-laden and littered with errors) students quickly develop the attitude that it does not really matter. While such an attitude prevails there will be little improvement in the work of students. A desire to learn, a belief in the need to develop competence, is essential if there is to be an improvement in the language performance of students.

The academic critics of secondary school standards - be they of language or scholarship generally - should support such policies if they understand the significance of the language-thinking nexus mentioned above. This understanding is hardly new: earlier this century Wittgenstein succinctly expressed the connection in his comment "the limits of my language are the limits of my world".

In reminding readers of this comment it is not intended to claim that all thinking uses language, nor that there is only one language. Artists, no doubt, think visually while scientists and mathematicians at times think in the language of mathematics. There is, however, more common ground between everyday language and the language of mathematics than some mathematicians and scientists seem willing to admit.

The late Robert Schoenfeld, respected editor of the *Australian Journal of Chemistry* and author of the fine book, the *Chemists' English*, makes the following comment:

> The two languages, English and mathematics, do not cover identical territory. There are thoughts that can be expressed in one language but not in the other, and it is wrong to assume that mathematics is all-embracing and to allow it to dominate communications (Schoenfeld 1986: 103).

This advice, if followed, would lead to much better writing by many mathematics and science students, just as the eschewing of jargon by many humanities and social science students would produce the same result.

The need for all teachers and academics to accept responsibility for the language development of their students can be seen when one considers the changing population entering tertiary institutions. The changing population is a reflection of community demand and government policy that an increased proportion of the population should have access to tertiary education.

There is little point in teachers and academics lamenting current standards or yearning for the supposed golden standards of yesteryear. The world has changed and they must adapt. The following figures from Western Australia are representative of the magnitude of the change in the upper school population in Australian secondary schools. In 1955 the Year 12 population was 11% of the number who had entered Year 8 five years before. In 1988 the Year 12 cohort represented 54% of its equivalent Year 8 intake. The tertiary institutions know this, but have been slow to adopt policies in which all disciplines accept responsibility for the continued language development of students.

There are some tertiary courses which make few writing demands on students and which extensively use multiple-choice and short answer methods of assessment in the early years. It is often only in the third or fourth year of such courses that students are asked to write papers or dissertations. It is somewhat astonishing, then, that academics in these disciplines sometimes blame the secondary English teacher for the perceived linguistic weaknesses of the students.

While there are some academics who pursue this line of reasoning there are others who argue that literacy is an outdated concept. They are often proponents of newer subject areas, such as media and computer studies, and they assert that the next generation will not need to be able to read and write as voice-print computers will do this for them. In the view of such people there is far too much time devoted to English in secondary schools.

Apart from the fact that such views reveal a lack of understanding of the nature of language they ignore the value that the community places on language competence. The community expects educated people to be literate and there is already evidence that there are some young people who are highly competent in technical areas, such as computing, who have limited language competence.

Employers are rightly concerned about graduates of either secondary or tertiary institutions whose limited competence in English is manifest in poor communication. Such a limitation has the potential to jeopardise client relationships as well as the efficiency and harmony of an organisation. Invariably, then, people with limited command of language will find employers, particularly in the private sector, reluctant to appoint them to a range of positions in areas such as management and marketing.

Employers who understand that language learning is a lifelong process will be concerned to help junior employees develop competence. They will adopt practices such as providing models for writing tasks (memos, letters, reports) and encourage senior employees to respond to drafts of documents in positive, supportive terms. They are less likely to use the practice (widespread in some organisations) of delegating writing tasks to junior members who have little knowledge of the topic; the purpose of, and audience for whom the document is being written; and little experience in writing in the particular mode. The widespread use of such practices is the cause of much poor writing in public and private sectors alike.

There are many employers, academics and teachers who adopt sound practices

in helping young people develop in competence and confidence. Their work, however, is not of interest to the mass media. The media are interested in a story - the more sensational and simplistic the better - so the academic or employer who is willing to blame secondary schools for the perceived limited language skills of young people is guaranteed good coverage. Such indictments of secondary school English teaching ignore the evidence that there is much soundly based, good teaching taking place. No doubt there is, and has been, some English teaching that is less than satisfactory. This is an inevitable outcome of the chronic shortage of English teachers. Employing authorities have had minimal choice in the selection of English teachers for some years and many teachers who have been required to teach English recognise they are inadequately qualified for the task.

Continued attacks on the school system generally and English teachers in particular are hardly likely to attract English graduates into teaching. Indeed, such attacks are more likely to lead to good English teachers leaving teaching for employment elsewhere. A more constructive approach would be to support improvements in teaching conditions and salaries so that market forces would then assist those who employ teachers by giving them a wider choice of prospective teachers.

The development of language competence in secondary schools is the prime, but not sole, responsibility of the English teacher. It is time that other teachers, parents and the wider community accepted their share of the responsibility.

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Acknowledgements

CLASSROOM INTERACTION: SOME QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE DIFFERENCES IN A MIXED-ETHNICITY CLASSROOM

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Children's classroom success has been attributed to a variety of factors (Watts, 1975). Among these factors are the quality and number of interactions occurring between the teacher and the students (Brophy and Good, 1974). Students who attract a greater proportion of the teacher's time and experience more positive interactions are more likely to be successful than other students. Additionally it has been argued (McKessar and Thomas, 1978) that some students may have greater expertise in capturing a teacher's attention, that is, by initiating interactions, while King (1979) considered that students engaged in behaviours which were designed to maintain the teacher's performance expectations of them. Earlier literature suggested that the teacher was responsible for controlling the nature and quality of classroom interactions (Flanders, 1970) but the interactional skills identified by the above researchers suggest that a reciprocal procedural agreement exists between the teacher and some students (Zimmerman, 1987).

It might be hypothesised, therefore, that students who operate within such a reciprocal procedural agreement, as described above, will experience relatively more interactions and qualitatively different interactions with their teachers than will others in their classroom. It might also be hypothesised that some children's cultural backgrounds might not adequately prepare them for an interactional process that occurs in an educational context which is steeped in a Western educational tradition, and which is maintained by teachers who are successful products of that tradition. Some Aboriginal children, in particular, maybe less competent in using the interactional context to their advantage due to their possible emphasis on different processes of interaction. Even in an urban setting such difficulties might be demonstrated. Eagleson's (1982) study involving urban Aboriginal children has identified dialectic differences which may have their origins in particular socio-economic circumstances, thus drawing attention to possible differences between out-of-school and in-school language practices. Malin (1990) also has drawn attention to possible differences in the ways that Aboriginal children understand and respond to questions.

This present study examined classroom interactions and their relationship to the Aboriginal children in the class. The interactions between the teacher and students are of interest because they provide an indication of the classroom experiences of the child. A child who interacts frequently with the teacher will experience a different schooling from a child who interacts rarely. It was predicted that the quality and quantity of teacher-student interactions would vary among the students, and that Aboriginal students would be disadvantaged relative to other students, receiving fewer and different kinds of interactions.