**Book Reviews**

**LANGUAGE AND LEARNING.**

by James Britton.

*Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971. 295 pp. $6.95.*

Despite the seemingly endless stream of volumes on the teaching of English, the discipline has chronically suffered from the lack of organizing principles—it has never had an adequate psychology. Mired in lifeless notions of what literature is and how language functions, the profession's first response to the new "discoveries" in linguistics, for example, was to ossify in kind. Chomsky was mistakenly transformed into Roberts, and claims were made that at last true knowledge about language was being taught. In the face of such attitudes and practices it is only the rare English teacher who has a dynamic sense of what he is about, who judges the results of his classroom in terms of how his students go on to live their respective lives.

In *Language and Learning*, a synthesis of the most recent findings and observations in the field of language and psychology, James Britton sketches out a clearer picture than we have had to date of how our use of and confrontation with language, both inside and outside of the school, consciously or otherwise, is such a crucial factor in both our mental and personal development. Through his delicate insistence upon the humanizing function of language, Britton, who has been teaching English in Great Britain since 1930, challenges us to make English education, and all education for that matter, the liberating and on-going process it ought to be.

Britton's chief purpose is to elaborate the conception that we spend much of our lives ordering the confusion that surrounds us, a process that involves creating for ourselves a coherent and workable picture of how the environment impinges upon us:

... by various means of representation, and with the aid of language as an organizing principle, we construct each for himself a world representation: that we modify this representation in the light of further experience in order that our predictions may be better; and that we improvise upon it for a variety of reasons. (p. 31)

This idea for building up successive representations is borrowed from George Kelly,

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1 Noam Chomsky's transformational grammar represents a revolution in linguistic thinking, but it continues to be exploratory in nature. Paul Roberts, among others, rigidly poured these "findings" into graded English series which in some cases have been adopted on a state-wide basis.
whose work, Britton emphasizes, provides a new way of looking at learning, especially as it might be stimulated in the English classroom. Britton quotes Kelly extensively:

Man looks at his world through transparent patterns or templates which he creates and then attempts to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The fit is not always very good. Yet without such patterns the world appears to be such an undifferentiated homogeneity that man is unable to make any sense out of it. Even a poor fit is more helpful to him than nothing at all.

Experience is made up of the successive construing of events. It is not constituted merely by the succession of events themselves. It is not what happens around him that makes a man's experiences; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of life. The constructions one places upon events are working hypotheses which are about to be put to the test of experience. As one's anticipations or hypotheses are successively revised in the light of the unfolding sequence of events, a construction system undergoes a progressive evolution.

What Kelly is describing is a transactional model of human experience. As our experience accumulates with interactions with the environment, we continue to construct and demolish explanatory constructs. Just as at some point new scientific data require new scientific theories, so, too, as we develop, new experience taxes the thresholds of our old constructs, and this forces us to create new models of the world. Men are always reconsidering events, trying to interpret them and attach meaning to them, but unfortunately for many people the growth process stops and they become locked into patterns which they use over and over again to understand the continual influx of experience. However, from birth until the onset of this rigidity, the individual dynamically orders and reorders his experience as his personality is being formed.

With the idea of templates in mind it is easy to see the crucial importance of language, for language is the stuff out of which we represent experience. Most of Britton's book is centered upon this integral use of language to symbolize what is occurring around us. To operate with some modicum of efficiency, the individual needs to build up some sense of stability and predictability. Language, being one step removed from the actual sensing of experience in the environment, grants us this lead time. It allows us to explore and play with the meanings and possibilities of experience, freed from the realities of onrushing time.

Language, of course, is expressed in many modes and serves countless ends. The distinction Britton expands upon is between participant and spectator language. A "participant" is "participating in the world's affairs" (Can you help me find the glue? Top drawer . . . etc.). A "spectator" is "contemplating experiences, enjoying them, vividly reconstructing them perhaps—but experiences in which he is not taking part" (Last week when I was in church . . . ) (p. 104). There are many gradations along this continuum, but what is most important to remember is that at times we are in the midst of action while at other times we are enjoying or analyzing the representation of actions, real and imagined, ours.

and others. To explain these categories more precisely Britton fills his book with numerous examples and transcripts of language being used in its various forms by children and adults. And in presenting this evidence, Britton synthesizes much current research from Piaget to Bruner; but although a framework is sketched out (how children first discover and extend their language, the importance of talk at all stages of development, and so on), Britton, like the thinkers he refers to, is careful to point out that our knowledge in these areas is still rudimentary.

The implications of Kelly's schema for the teaching of English are profound. The conventional conception of education whereby one's experience and knowledge result from the linear accruing of events and data is no longer valid (and to be sure this static conception has already been attacked on many fronts by many of the people whose work Britton cites). Rather, learning is much more a matter of the successive discovery, construction, and modification of symbolic models. To take a specific example of how this would influence current practices, let us consider Britton's approach to reading instruction. Reading is too frequently viewed as a word upon word buildup until some conclusion is reached at the end of a particular piece. In contradistinction to this, Britton tells us reading is the filling in of details for a pattern of focused expectations. "The meaning is an emergent pattern of relationships—more like a negative in the developing dish than it is like a train coming out of a tunnel" (p. 161). As we read at any level our anticipation is either borne out or jarred. If the latter, we must construct a new pattern as we re-read and re-interpret. Consequently any teaching which involves the piecemeal presentation of items simply does not match the dynamic psychological process the student undergoes when he is reading (or learning). Thus Britton predictably comments:

The notion of 'providing vocabulary' is a limited and misleading one, suggesting an all too static conception of language. Language in use is a flow, a current of activity, and not any sort of reservoir. The words a child can come by in this deliberate fashion at the teacher's providing—in the course of a vocabulary lesson—will tend to be those of limited use, necessary at times but with little power to vitalize the current of speech. Teachers need to care about the flow—about reading 'as though it made sense', and writing and talking—and when they do, the reservoir will look after itself. To put it another way, it is from successive experiences of words in use—words used for some actual profit or pleasure—that a child builds up his resources, and there is little point therefore in our dragging things in by their names. (p. 163)

It is in the area of literature, it seems to me, that Britton is most helpful for the English teacher. For too long we have lived amid a herd of sacred cows, squeezed between the revered classics and the rigid canons of literary criticism. In this tradition literature is an object, something to be collected and classified, and dutifully passed on like the periodic table in chemistry. Britton's view is transactional in nature (something Louise Rosenblatt, among others, has been telling us for years,3), i.e., literature is an object requiring a subject, and, furthermore, it is the written form

of language in the role of spectator. Such a notion at first glance debases accepted literary standards, but Britton anticipates such criticism:

I think it is helpful to have a way of defining literature which refers to the sort of thing it is rather than one which brings in the judgment as to how good it is of its kind. It is not that I feel the question 'how good is it?' is not a highly important question, but I think it should come after and not instead of the question, 'what is it?'. (Picasso is a better painter than an average child in the Infant School, yet they both paint.) If we operate only with a normative definition of literature—one that begins to apply above a certain threshold of excellence—we are left with the difficulty of deciding what a piece of writing is that tries but fails to rise above the threshold. It must be something. We have only to think of the kind of writing done every day by thousands of children in school to see that this is not an entirely frivolous objection. (p. 108)

Given that written language in the role of spectator describes the kind of thing literature is, we next see that its use in and out of the classroom ought to be concerned with how human contingencies are presented and subsequently with the refinement of our templates of experience. As David Holbrook, borrowing from the "object-relations" school of psychoanalysis, has argued, the development of a secure and loving identity is a function of the extent to which the individual is able to build a coherent picture of external reality which matches his internal reality (what he sees vs. what he feels). Literature provides much symbolic content which allows for the verification of these psychic realities. And it is only when we step back as spectators that we can work on the meanings of and create patterns for the experience that continually confronts us. This is the central purpose of literature (which includes children's writings) and ought to be the goal of English instruction.

Naturally, this notion of literature and English teaching sounds very liberal and free-wheeling—relevance and the child are the thing! Yet Britton easily transcends the merely voguish practices and facile rhetoric of the educational romantics. He is for trusting students, to be sure; still, he is very clear about the teacher having a professional role, one which is neither the "subject-specialist" nor the "pseudo-parent." The relationship between the teacher and student, despite its inevitable closeness, must never be an object in and of itself; rather, it is a means to the end of the student's learning and personal growth. Similarly, Britton is clear about what children or adolescents can and cannot handle emotionally. Relevance is not keeping up with the avant-garde, but using material which offers sufficient predictability to the student so as to be accessible and challenging, without being overly threatening. Such a view, for instance, gives us a better perspective on "trash" literature, which teachers have been castigating for years. Many books, although not necessarily noteworthy for their style or message, might be entirely appropriate in terms of the themes and situations they allow the student to contemplate. This is not to say that anything goes, but that some works make more demands upon us as readers (spectators), and that the road to a mature response (not just to literature

but to life) is long and circuitous. Again the point is to work on our representations, not to find easy formulas.

With regard to the contemporary propensity to impose a disjunction between cognitive and affective modes of representation, Britton writes:

Psychologists in general have traditionally concentrated upon cognitive organization and tended to regard emotion as itself disorganized and possessing a disorganizing influence. We need to recognize the value and importance both of the discursive logical organization and at the same time that of the undissociated intuitive processes, the organization represented in its highest form in works of art. (p. 217)

It is this split which causes much harm in English education today. In advocating the "free expression" of the child (the affective revolt against the long reign of cognition) too many romantics forget that to create we need content to work upon, and that the literary process involves more than freedom—it is the exploration of inner modes of representation symbolized in language as they compare to outer forms of reality. The result is so much relativity; yet Britton has illuminated some philosophical boundaries which we can make use of as we attempt to order our language and, one hopes, our lives.

At the end of Language and Learning, Britton cautions us against overestimating the role of language in the representation of experience: "There will always be a gap between our total response to what confronts us and any formulation we can make of what was there and what took place." And so he returns to Kelly:

A person is not necessarily articulate [Kelly says], about the constructions he places upon his world. Some of his constructions are not symbolized by words; he can express them only in pantomime. Even the elements which are construed may have no verbal handles by which they can be manipulated and the person finds himself responding to them with speechless impulse. Thus in studying the psychology of man-the-philosopher, we must take into account his subverbal patterns of representation and construction. (p. 277)

And to this end Britton discusses the role of dramatics in English. Still, in expressing both our conscious and unconscious tendencies, language is of central importance. It is the chief means by which we can develop increasingly more valid constructs of our experience. This, it seems to me, is what English teaching should be about—helping children (and adults) to use language and literature to better enjoy and control their lives. And Britton's book helps us to be much more aware of how we might go about this.

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This Report, published shortly after Chairman Wilson C. Riles became "Ex--