

PAPER 8

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

There are three types of language teaching: prescriptive, descriptive and productive. They are not of course mutually exclusive, and all may have a place in the native language class, provided they are reasonably balanced and their different purposes are understood.

PRESCRIPTIVE: Prescriptive language teaching is the interference with existing skills for the purpose of replacing one pattern of activity, already successfully acquired, by another: it is thus restricted to the native language. Prescriptive here includes 'prescriptive,' since each 'do this' implies 'don't do this,' whichever of the two formulations is given the major emphasis.

Prescriptive teaching means selecting those patterns at any level (language level as grammar, lexis, phonology or phonetics), which are favored by some, including some of the more influential members of the language community, and using standard teaching practices to persuade the children to conform to them.

Prescriptive teaching takes a number of different forms. Some prescriptions cover both speech and writing: most, however, are specifically directed either at spoken language or at written language. Within the later comes the special case of prescriptions concerning the transference of spoken language patterns into the written language, particularly in the early stages of the teaching of reading and writing. The teaching of reading and writing is itself productive, not prescriptive; it may entail some prescriptive teaching if children are taught that some patterns that are acceptable in speech must not be transferred into writing. This is a consequence of the divergence between written and spoken language, and opinions differ how this divergence should be a matter for prescriptive teaching.

Prescriptive teaching in the written language is usually concentrated on the various do's and don't's of traditional grammar. Even many of the prescriptive rules rest on false notions of traditional grammar, but since they represent social attitudes and have no significance as statements about the nature of the language, this does not matter.

In the spoken language, on the other hand, prescriptive alteration of the children's phonetic habits tends to be achieved rather by example and by social pressure, including ridicule, than by classroom teaching, though the elocution lesson is a notable exception.

There is no point in engaging in polemics against prescriptive teaching as such. The justification for it lies not in the English language but in the attitude to the English language of some of those who use it. The insistence should be on entirely arbitrary nature of prescriptions, all of which could be turned upside down without any change in validity: those who hold prescriptive views would still hold them and those who reject them would still reject them. At the same time there are two ways in which positive harm may be done by prescriptive language teaching. One is that it too easily becomes prescriptive, with all attention focused on what must not be done. The other is that it may come to occupy, and there is no doubt that it still often does, a central place in the teaching of the native language.

DESCRIPTIVE: The second type of language teaching is description. Descriptive language teaching is the demonstration of how language works: this involves talking

about skills already acquired, without trying to alter them, but showing how they are used.

Descriptive language teaching is showing the child how language works by displaying, ordering and adding to his use of his native language. There are indeed methods of descriptive language teaching appropriate to any age at which the teacher wishes to introduce it. These can be related to the general concept of 'strata' of linguistics, or more specially strata of grammar, of lexis and so on, as the links which together make up the chain from academic 'back-room' linguistics at one end to classroom practice at the other.

The first stratum is work on general linguistic theory by linguists. The second stratum is the use of this theory to describe actual languages. The third stratum is the description of a language for the use of those who teach it. Fourth comes the text book, the work that is placed in the hands of the pupils themselves who are learning the language. The fifth stratum, which could perhaps be subsumed under the previous one, is the actual content of the classroom teaching: the methods by which the teacher displays the language at work, the features he selects to illustrate and the type of language he himself uses to talk about them.

If we can display the grammar and lexis of English, and at least a part of the phonology, by direct appeal to the situations in which language is used, we are exploiting the contextual meaning of language to provide information about its formal meaning. This probably has its uses at any stage in the pupils' learning about their language, later, however, the formal patterns themselves can be systematically presented and the phonology related to them. In this way one builds up a general picture of what happens in English. Even if this never proceeded beyond a few basic patterns and most general categories, it would have the merit of being accurate and giving some idea of the nature of language with the inclusion of a sound description of English phonetics, which we have not illustrated here but which is no less important and no less practiceable; the descriptive teaching of the native language could be of the highest educational value. PRODUCTIVE: The third type of language teaching is what we have called its productive component. Descriptive language teaching aims to show the pupil how English works: these include making him aware of his own use of English. Productive language teaching is concerned to help him extend the use of his native language in the most effective way. Unlike prescriptive teaching, productive teaching is designed not to alter patterns he has already acquired but to add to his resources; and to do so in such a way that he has the greatest possible range of the potentialities of his language available to him for appropriate use, in all the varied situations in which he needs them.

It is the use of different varieties of the native language rather than the actual introduction of new patterns and items, which is the focus of productive language teaching. Productive language teaching solely concentrates on the teaching of composition. It seeks to develop the ability to speak and write a native language.

We could perhaps enumerate what seems to us to be the four principal aims of native language teaching. The first is educational: everybody should know something of how his own language works. The second is pragmatic: everybody needs to learn to use his language most effectively. The third and fourth are indirect: to know about the native language is to be well equipped both for learning a foreign language and for understanding and appreciating the native literature.