

LANGUAGE, COGNITION, AND LEARNING: EXPRESSIVE WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

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An 8th grade social studies teacher is preparing to introduce the concept of nationalism to her 5th period American history class. This semester, she has instituted a new practice of beginning 5th period with daily "free writes." During the first seven minutes of class, students write nonstop, sometimes producing good writing but often not. The teacher asks only that the students find words for their thoughts and record them directly, almost as if they are talking aloud. The emphasis is on the process, not on the product.

Normally, the students choose their own topic, but today the teacher tries to focus their attention on nationalism. She writes on the board, "Tell what flag and country mean to you." She urges them to write freely, to write down as many thoughts as they can in the time allotted. She then signals them to begin writing.

Today this classroom scene strikes a cord of recognition for teachers who use writing as a pedagogical tool in their social studies, math, science, and other content-area classes. These teachers have discovered the benefits of using free writes, journal writing, and other similar writing experiences that encourage students to express their ideas, feelings, and opinions—appropriately called expressive writing.

In this essay, I examine the origin of expressive writing with a brief discussion and analysis of its history and intellectual roots. First, I give a short historical account of the language-across-the-curriculum reform movement in Britain and suggest that expressive writing, when used as a teaching and learning strategy, represents many assumptions of that movement. Second, I tell about a transatlantic conference held at Dartmouth College where British and American educators met and exchanged ideas about language and learning. Third, I explain how psycholinguistics has provided the intellectual framework for expressive writing. Finally, I revisit the classroom scene that begins this essay.

CURRICULUM REFORM IN BRITAIN

The father of expressive writing is James Britton, a University of London researcher. As a young English teacher in the 1940s, Britton became involved in a movement to reform the English class syllabus in British schools and later emerged as a spokesperson for sweeping reforms in English teaching throughout Britain. He is generally credited with popularizing the language-across-the-curriculum reform movement.¹

In 1947, Britton helped form the London Association for the Teaching of English (LATE), an organization that reassessed the emphasis on grammar in teaching English.² Recounting the early history of reform in English language classrooms, Britton explains how "The Ancient and Wearisome Controversy on Grammar" changed from a debate over how to teach grammar to a debate over whether to teach it at all.³ Grammar's predominance in the British classroom diminished, and a new philosophy emphasizing language as a way to learn took its place.

In 1969, members of LATE wrote a policy statement asking English teachers "to look at language in school, not as a subject to be taught and tested, but as an approach to learning."⁴ The goal was for language experiences to follow students throughout the school day as a way to learn across the curriculum. By 1971, the National Association for the Teaching of English, LATE's umbrella organization, devoted its annual conference to language across the curriculum, signaling a commitment to interdisciplinary cooperation in using language to learn.⁵

With the publication of the Bullock report in 1975, the Ministry of Education gave its official support for language as an activity central to learning.⁶ Presented to the Thatcher government in September 1974, the Bullock report states, "Each school should have an organized policy for language across the curriculum, establishing every teacher's involvement in language and reading development throughout the years of schooling."⁷ Language instruction in the United Kingdom had come a long way since the creation of LATE in 1947. For this, Britton—as a teacher who helped organize LATE and as a researcher who helped marshal support for the language-across-the-curriculum reform movement—deserves much credit.

¹Pat Bissell and Bruce Herzberg, "Writing-across-the-Curriculum Textbooks: A Bibliographic Essay," *Rhetoric Review* 3 (January 1985): 202.

²James Britton, "How We Got Here," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 14.

³*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴Douglas Barnes, James Britton, and Harold Rosen, *Language, the Learner, and the School* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 119.

⁵James Britton, "How We Got Here," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 13.

⁶Alan Bullock, *A Language for Life* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975), p. 514.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 47–50.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING DEFINED

Britton published his research on writing in the 1960s and '70s.⁸ In 1971, with the support of the University of London's Writing Research Unit, Britton and his fellow researchers observed students' writing behavior in upper level British classrooms. Using data on the writing behavior of students aged 11 to 18, Britton and the others defined three kinds of writing that students do in school: (1) *transactional* writing for conveying information (to inform, advise, persuade, or instruct); (2) *expressive* writing for thinking aloud on paper (to explore feelings, opinions, ideas, and preoccupations of the moment); and (3) *poetic* writing (to construct a language object such as a narrative or verse).⁹ Britton found that older students, aged 17 and 18, spent more than 80 percent of their time using transactional writing. At all age levels studied, transactional writing was never less than 54 percent.¹⁰

As Britton described in *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, transactional writing is a form of "school writing" that requires students to craft an essay to be handed in to the teacher-as-examiner.¹¹ Unlike this teacher-prescribed and teacher-monitored writing, expressive writing is for the student's own use. Expressive writing, which straddles the other two forms of writing, offers students a loose, undemanding form of writing for exploring their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.¹² As a form "free from constraints and uninhibiting," expressive writing enhances students' ability to think and to learn, a benefit that Britton found largely overlooked by teachers who seldom encouraged students to use expressive writing in class.¹³

As developed by Britton, expressive writing encompasses many assumptions about language and learning that are hallmarks of the language-across-the-curriculum reform movement:

- Language and thought are related.
- Language activity is at the center of learning.
- Students should be encouraged to explore their personal lives and interior thoughts while using language.
- Language helps students find out what they know and don't know.
- In using language, students discover ideas and shape their thinking.¹⁴

⁸See, for example, Douglas Barnes, James Britton, and Harold Rosen, *Language, the Learner, and the School* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969); James Britton, *Language and Learning* (New York: Penguin, 1970).

⁹James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (London: Macmillan Education, 1975), pp. 88-91.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹²James Britton, "How We Got Here," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 24.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴Joyce Honeychurch, "Language across the Curriculum: A Short History" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Curriculum History, New Orleans, 1988).

THE TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTION

In 1966, Britton's research and clinical observations crossed the Atlantic when he and other British educators exchanged ideas with their American counterparts at Dartmouth College.¹⁵ During this meeting, known as the Dartmouth Seminar, the British introduced a new child-centered criterion for teaching English: Children learn by using their own language. As Arthur Applebee observes, "What the British offered the Americans was a model for English teaching which focused not on the demands of the discipline but on the personal and linguistic growth of the child."¹⁶

British professor John Dixon, a participant at the Dartmouth Seminar, published his reflections on the proceedings in 1967. Dixon notes that the Seminar concentrated on defining what the best classroom practices should be. The British, he observes, stressed experience and the use of language; the Americans were more interested in teaching about language and in building skill-based and literature-as-heritage programs.¹⁷

Among the Americans attending the Dartmouth Seminar, one participant strongly disagreed with the skills and heritage emphasis in U.S. schools: James Moffett, a Harvard research associate in English who arrived at the Seminar with two book manuscripts in hand.¹⁸ Moffett's books were published two years later and advanced the cause for increased language experience, especially oral language and expressive writing, in U.S. schools, thereby advancing the British point of view. Moffett recounts the reception his manuscripts received: "From many of the British at Dartmouth I received a gratifying corroboration of my approach, which included much drama and other peer interaction and which resembled the open classroom, though I had known nothing of what the British were doing."¹⁹

Moffett, along with other U.S. English language theorists and writing researchers in the 1960s and '70s, was an important source of method and philosophy for those reassessing English teaching in the United States during that time.²⁰ To identify the intellectual roots for expressive writing and the

¹⁵According to John Dixon, by 1966 Britton and his fellow writing researchers had "looked at the whole range of written work across the school." See John Dixon, *Growth through English* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xiii.

¹⁶Arthur Applebee, *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974), p. 229.

¹⁷John Dixon, *Growth through English* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 72.

¹⁸James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968); James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, *A Student-centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13. A Handbook for Teachers* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968).

¹⁹James Moffett, *Coming on Center* (Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981), p. 1.

²⁰See, for example, Donald M. Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1968); Ken Macrorie, *Upstaged* (New York: Hayden, 1970); Janet Emig, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971); Peter Elbow, *Writing without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Donald Graves, *Balance the Basics: Let Them Write* (New York: Ford

language-across-the-curriculum reforms that took place in Britain and the United States, however, we must broaden our perspective to consider the revolutionary work of linguist Noam Chomsky and the role psycholinguistics played in shaping Britton's theories on language and learning.

LANGUAGE AND MIND

Harvard psychologist and historian Howard Gardner defines the cognitive sciences as "that recently formed amalgam of disciplines which probes the operations of the human mind."²¹ In *The Mind's New Sciences: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, Gardner identifies Noam Chomsky's work in linguistics as a part of this amalgam, pointing out that Chomsky's research provides "a paradigmatic example of clear-cut scientific progress."²²

Chomsky's first major work, *Syntactic Structures*, was published in 1957, and in 1959 his theories about language achieved international attention.²³ In a debate with B. F. Skinner on the relationship between language and the mind, Chomsky challenged Skinner's functional description of language. Chomsky wrote a scathing review of Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior*, questioning Skinner's application of such notions as stimulus, reinforcement, and deprivation to explain human speech.²⁴ Chomsky points out that these ideas might be appropriate in experiments with laboratory animals but not with human subjects, especially when dealing with something as complex as human language.²⁵ In short, Chomsky criticizes Skinner for looking only at the surface elements of language while ignoring the deeper mental processes and structures.²⁶

For Chomsky, unlike Skinner, language is relatively stimulus-free behavior and is more intimately connected to the structure of the mind than to experience. Although environment assumes some importance in Chomsky's explanation of verbal behavior—for example, when a child uses imitation in learning to talk—language acquisition, according to Chomsky, does not depend only on the reinforcement of a child's utterances but also on the fundamental processes of language working "quite independently of 'feed-

Foundation, 1978); Sondra Perl, "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English* 13 (December 1979): 317-336.

²¹Howard Gardner, "Preface," in *Language and Learning: The Debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, ed. M. Piattelli-Palmarini (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. xix

²²Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 222.

²³Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957).

²⁴B. F. Skinner, *Verbal Behavior* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957).

²⁵Noam Chomsky, "A Review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*," in *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 549.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 563.

back' from the environment."²⁷ Skinner failed to respond to Chomsky's criticisms of *Verbal Behavior*, which elevated Chomsky's reputation but didn't end the debate.

BRITTON AND CHOMSKY

In a retrospective on English education, Britton praises Chomsky's "formidable attack" on the "Skinnerian model."²⁸ Britton rejects Skinner's explanation of language acquisition and opposes Skinner's influence on classroom practices. He particularly opposes behavioral objectives that require teachers to decide "which responses to which stimuli are to be reinforced." Behavioral objectives, according to Britton, assign to the teacher "the full responsibility for deciding what is to be learned and how," thus severely limiting learning by underestimating what the student brings to the learning experience. Under these conditions, Britton notes, a teacher might as well be training a pigeon (instead of a human being).²⁹ In putting full responsibility for teaching and learning under a teacher's control, the behaviorist fails to recognize the many forms of human behavior in which learning occurs.³⁰ In short, Britton suggests that behavioral objectives cannot begin to circumscribe student learning behavior that is typically human and, therefore, variable, diverse, and idiosyncratic.

Quoting from Chomsky's "A Review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*," Britton contrasts Chomsky's and Skinner's view of the learner. Looking specifically at Chomsky's description of "the way an infant learns to speak," Britton quotes Chomsky: "The child who learns a language has in some sense constructed the grammar for himself on the basis of his observations of sentences and non-sentences."³¹ Using this statement as an example, Britton embraces the Chomskyan view of the child's learning experience. The child negotiates this experience with innate mental capabilities that make acquiring and understanding language easier. These linguistic capabilities are complex and mysterious, however, they allow human beings to perform an intricate learning task at an amazingly early age. In another section of his "Review," Chomsky outlines a more comprehensive description of this theory: "The fact that all normal children acquire essentially comparable grammars of great complexity with remarkable rapidity suggests that human beings are

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸James Britton, "How We Got Here," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 16.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., pp. 16–17.

³¹Ibid., p. 16.

somehow specially designed to do this, with data-handling or hypothesis-formulating ability of unknown character and complexity.³²

The innate ability of children to handle data and formulate hypotheses when working with language suggests to both Chomsky and Britton that language is intimately related to thought. For Britton, this insight translates into what is most important to the classroom teacher—the likelihood that language, cognition, and learning are connected. Britton comments on the contribution of Chomsky and linguistics to teachers of English: “The work of Chomsky and other linguists in recent years has certainly given strong support to a conviction on the part of English teachers that a child’s own language is a precious means to his learning.”³³

Chomsky, on the other hand, uses the child’s innate language capabilities as evidence for the construction of his scientific models of language. In his history of the cognitive sciences, Gardner observes, “In [Chomsky’s] view, language provided the best model for how to conceptualize and study thought processes.”³⁴ The term *thought processes* as Gardner uses it here, however, does not refer to the expressive potential of language but to the structures of language that derive from the structure of the mind itself. In a real sense, the use of language, the fluid representation of thought, remained a mystery to Chomsky.

Although Chomsky’s early linguistic work indicates the potential for an important link between thought and language, he fails to detail a precise relationship between the two. The subject does not elude his comment, Chomsky states:

Roughly, where we deal with cognitive structures, either in a mature state of knowledge and belief or in the initial state, we face problems, but not mysteries. When we ask how and why [language users] make choices and behave as they do, although there is much that we can say as human beings with intuition and insight, there is little, I believe, that we can say as scientists.³⁵

Britton and his associates were indebted to Chomsky for providing a general framework describing the nature and acquisition of language. Yet researchers still faced persistent questions about the relationship between language, thinking, and learning. Perhaps the most significant question among those yet unanswered was how thought and language interconnect in the act of writing.

³²Noam Chomsky, “A Review of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior*,” in *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Jerry A. Fodor and Jerrold J. Katz (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 577.

³³James Britton, “How We Got Here,” in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 17.

³⁴Howard Gardner, *The Mind’s New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 193.

³⁵Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 7.

VYGOTSKY ON THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

Chomsky's ground-breaking work helped to transform linguistics into an exciting new field of inquiry.³⁶ In the midst of this excitement, an important book appeared: the 1962 translation of Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, a book in which Vygotsky confronts what Chomsky found mysterious—how thought and language work together.³⁷ This book provided some of the answers that Britton and his associates were seeking.

In describing the interrelationship between thought and language, Vygotsky observes that children talk to themselves, which he terms "speech for oneself", a medium for thought that begins as vocal expression in young children and travels underground as the child matures, becoming "inner speech." Inner speech contains meaning and provides substance for "verbal thought," which is the storehouse for communicative language. As Vygotsky explains, "Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings. It is a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing fluttering between word and thought, the two more or less stable, more or less firmly delineated components of verbal thought."³⁸ In the process of writing, we access verbal thought, but not without effort and tentativeness.³⁹

BRITTON AND VYGOTSKY

Britton and his University of London colleagues were especially interested in Vygotsky's message about the process of writing. As Britton and the others note in their report on the development of writing, Vygotsky's definition of inner speech is crucial in understanding writing and its connection to thought:

The best description of the dialectical interrelationship of thought and language is still probably that provided by Vygotsky. Our concern here is to stress how intimately the thought-language dialectic is involved in the process of writing. In particular, the way Vygotsky defines inner speech is of crucial importance.⁴⁰

Vygotsky's work suggested to Britton that the written word is a product of a journey that advances "first in inner speech, then in meanings of words, and finally in words." Although writing is a strenuous process in which the

³⁶Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 207–222.

³⁷L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1962).

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁰James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11–18)* (London: Macmillan Education, 1975), p. 39.

writer must change "maximally compact inner speech" to written speech, the process accesses and shapes thought.⁴¹

In studying Vygotsky's roadmap for the writing and thinking journey, Britton theorizes that expressive writing, which in young children is often "written down speech," is closely connected to inner speech.⁴² When using expressive writing, students "talk aloud on paper," and in so doing, they explore new knowledge: "[Expressive writing] is the form of language in which we 'first-draft' our tentative or speculative ideas. In other words, it is an essential mode for learning—for the tentative exploration of new areas of knowledge."⁴³ In short, expressive writing, the most personal and spontaneous form of writing, gives students full rein on the writing and thinking process, allowing them to write, think, and learn.

The 8th graders have finished their free writes about flag and country, and the teacher now asks them to get into their discussion groups. They move into small groups without any complaint, eager to share their opinions and knowledge.

As the teacher watches her students, she remembers what she recently read about the British language-across-the-curriculum reform movement. She silently acknowledges the legacy of James Britton and of the many dedicated British classroom teachers whose cross-discipline curriculum reforms in the 1960s are now helping her and the other teachers in the school.

"Our students are writing, even in their math classes," she proudly notes. In many ways, she considers the faculty's efforts to use writing in every subject the greatest schoolwide improvement in years. She knows that her students are writing in their other classes because teachers talk about what is working and what is not. She likes the new openness and the attitude of sharing among faculty members.

A student's voice interrupts her thoughts. Kevin is saying that a flag is a powerful symbol, especially during war. The teacher looks around and sees that Shella, sitting across from him, is about to respond.

She thinks, "It's good that students are defining issues using their own language. When students use their own language, they are transforming their understanding into something concrete, something they can reflect on. From formulation to reflection, writing is a marvelous way to get students to think." Reminding herself that her observations are not original, the teacher again reflects on the legacy of James Britton, who explained the importance of a child's own language. She recalls Noam Chomsky's work, which described a

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 11.

⁴³James Britton, "How We Got Here," in *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of English*, ed. Nicholas Bagnall (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1973), p. 26.

child's natural propensity to make language; and she thinks about L. S. Vygotsky, who described the connection between inner speech and writing. The teacher smiles to herself.

The noise level jars the teacher from her thoughts. She goes to the chalkboard and says, "Class, let's list some of our ideas on the board so we all can see what we know and feel about flag and country. And then we'll try to apply our thoughts to people from other countries who might not be citizens of the United States, but who, like us, have a flag and a country."

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Brady, Marion. *What's Worth Teaching. Selecting, Organizing, and Integrating Knowledge*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989. 147 pp. \$14.95.

The perennial question of how to organize the general education or "common learnings" portion of the curriculum is addressed in this volume. Brady makes the call that "sociocultural systems" should be the central organizing concept for general education. Four components—patterns of action, cultural premises, demographics, and environment—and their interrelations form an alternative scheme to the traditional subject divisions. Brady explains how to teach the traditional academic disciplines more meaningfully through the proposed conceptual model and shows how educators at all levels can integrate curriculum.

—Gordon F. Vars

Jacobs, Heidi Hayes, ed. *Interdisciplinary Curriculum. Design and Implementation*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989. 97 pp. \$13.95.

In this brief monograph, Jacobs and her colleagues make a strong case for interdisciplinary curriculum, propose a continuum of design options, suggest practical matters to be considered, and give several examples. They give step-by-step suggestions for developing integrated units and for integrating thinking and learning skills across the curriculum. Unfortunately, the authors deal only with the cognitive aspect of interdisciplinary curriculum design and do not provide a bibliography of sources where the reader may obtain specific details on the procedures described in general terms.

—Gordon F. Vars

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