

## **Guidelines For Evaluating School Instruction About Language**

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### **Introduction**

This document is a discussion paper commissioned by CLIE - the Committee for Linguistics in Education, a joint committee of the Linguistics Association of Great Britain and the British Association for Applied Linguistics. CLIE tries to make the findings of linguistics and applied linguistics more readily available to the world of education, in the belief that many of these findings are relevant and valuable. The present paper is about the linguistic education of our school children, in the broadest sense of "linguistic" - what children ought to know about language by the end of their school careers. The paper does not argue for the inclusion of "linguistics" as an examinable curriculum subject. That may or may not be a good idea, but it is a separate issue.

We try to show how inadequate the knowledge of language is which most school-leavers have, and how unnecessary this ignorance is. Academic linguistics has a considerable amount of more or less uncontroversial knowledge which would be easy for children to learn, and which would also be valuable for them. We leave open the questions of how this should be taught and by whom. We hope that the paper might provide general principles by which more specific proposals for syllabi and examinations could be evaluated.

### **1 The Need for a Coherent Language Policy**

1.1 The level of understanding of language among school-leavers is much lower than it should be. Even those who achieve high grades at A level are typically ignorant about elementary matters to do with language, and are unaware of their ignorance. Instead of laying a solid foundation on which a mature understanding of language can grow, schools may even provide misinformation and prejudice which need to be removed before growth is possible. What pupils learn about language at school comes as much from the "hidden curriculum" as from formal teaching, and they also pick up many beliefs and myths about language outside school. Consequently it is essential for the "official" curriculum of schools to be carefully planned so as to counteract these sources of misunderstanding and also for the training of future teachers to be planned with similar care. Hence the need for a coherent language policy both within each school, and nationally

1.2 A few concrete examples will help to illustrate how little school-leavers know about language. As university teachers of linguistics and applied linguistics we find that the following propositions are true of very many first-year students, even though these students have chosen to specialise in the study of language.

- a. They find it hard to distinguish between a word's pronunciation and its spelling.
- b. They are unaware that ordinary spoken language is tightly controlled by rules, believing that where speech is at variance with the written form it is simply wrong.
- c. They cannot define a single structural difference between their own language and some other language which they have learned at school.
- d. They know virtually nothing about the structure of their own language.
- e. They have very little terminology for discussing matters of style and other kinds of variation within their own language.
- f. They know very little about the history of their own language or about its relations with other languages.
- g. They know nothing about how children learn their first language or about the part that parents play in this.

We assume that our students are among those school-leavers most likely to be well informed about language, and that other school-leavers know even less.

1.3 We shall refer to the knowledge about language that most school-leavers have as "school linguistics", in contrast with academic linguistics as practised and taught in universities and colleges in this country and many others. By "academic linguistics" we mean any serious university-level research-based studies of language, and not just the particular variety often called "theoretical linguistics". There are of course theoretical disputes in academic linguistics, but beneath these there is also a substantial body of shared beliefs and assumptions significantly different from those found in school linguistics, which has been very little influenced by developments in academic linguistics. Because of these differences school linguistics is nearer to what we could call "folk linguistics" - the beliefs about language which are widespread in the population as a whole and which are transmitted independently of formal education.

1.4 The discrepancies between school linguistics and academic linguistics are not inevitable, though it is of course inevitable that schools can teach only part of academic linguistics. There are many parts of

academic linguistics which are sufficiently easy for children to understand them, and there is a range of good books available for teaching at this level. A more serious problem is the shortage of teachers with the necessary experience of academic linguistics, but this problem should not be exaggerated. For well over a decade linguistics has been available as an undergraduate subject and in colleges of education, and there are now enough linguistically sophisticated teachers in schools to justify an increasing interest from the examining boards and from publishers. In any case, the need for more training should make more resources available. It is worth pointing out that most specialist teachers of English have not themselves been able to study the language as such beyond GCE O-level. This is a situation which would not be tolerated in any other subject area, and it is particularly unacceptable in a subject as central as English.

1.5 Why does inadequate knowledge about language matter? There are a number of reasons, including the following.

- a. Language is a crucial part of our environment - for instance, it provides the main link between us and the culture of our society, and linguistic differences are among the most important distinguishing characteristics of different communities - and it is the aim of humanistic education to improve pupils' understanding of their environment.
- b. Linguistic prejudices are socially harmful - for example, prejudices about accents are divisive and demoralising.
- c. It is vital for our citizens to be able to communicate successfully, both in speech and in writing, and our schools accept the responsibility for improving communication skills in their pupils. It is debatable whether explicit knowledge about language leads directly to improved communication, but at least it seems clear that the teacher's task will be easier if such knowledge can be assumed in pupils.
- d. In particular, it is presumably easier to learn a foreign language if one understands how language works, and correspondingly harder if the learner is misinformed about language. Similarly, it is useful to know some grammatical terminology when learning a foreign language, as many foreign-language teachers make use of such terminology.
- e. The information revolution makes it essential for citizens to understand how natural language works in order to understand how best to modify it in communicating with computers.
- f. It is at best a waste of school time if it is spent on providing misinformation about language.
- g. The presence of native speakers of foreign languages in a class should be an important source of enrichment for teaching about

2.3 An item is *valuable* if it is important to the quality of life. In 1.5 we listed a number of problems which are due to inadequate knowledge of language, and an item can be taken as valuable if it helps to solve any of these problems, from the most "practical" (e.g. improving language-learning) to the most "academic" (improving the pupil's understanding of his or her environment). This criterion rules out any item which has no consequences for the pupil. One example of such an item would be an analysis of some exotic language without a discussion of the similarities and differences between that language and some language already known to the pupil, and without any generalisation to "language" as a whole. Another example would be an abstract outline of some theory of language structure without a good deal of discussion of its implications for the structure of particular sentences. Presumably virtually any item could be made valuable by an imaginative and knowledgeable teacher, but some items have more obvious consequences than others.

2.4 An item is *reliable* if it is compatible with the findings of academic linguistics (bearing in mind the broad definition which we gave to this term in 1.3). It is true that there is always a danger of putting too much faith in the experts, because they may be marching collectively up the garden path and folk linguistics could turn out to be right after all. However, this problem is faced in every area of life, and it is much more likely that the professionals are right. A more serious problem is that professional opinion is divided on a variety of issues in linguistics, so we feel it is safest to exclude such issues from our list of items. Even so we are left with a good number of areas of agreement among linguists, which include those documented in Richard Hudson, "Some issues on which linguists can agree", *Journal of Linguistics* 17, 1981. The items listed in the next section satisfy this criterion as well as the other two.

### 3. Minimum Knowledge About Language

3.1 The following paragraphs define five general types of knowledge about language, without picking out a list of particular instances of each type as specially worthy of teaching. For example our first type is defined as "some analytical categories", but we do not say which particular categories should be known. We have a number of reasons for leaving this choice open:

- a. The number of possible categories is vast, even when we apply our three criteria, so we cannot expect a "complete" knowledge.
- b. Any category is as good as any other when we consider one of the main purposes of learning categories, which is to illustrate the rule-governed nature of language and to understand how categories are defined by the rules which refer to them.

- c. Once a small number of categories are known, other categories can be added on more easily than if none were known, as the basic principles will have been learned, but again it probably matters very little which categories are learned first.
- d. The needs of different pupils in later life will be different (for example, they may apply the categories in learning foreign languages or in improving their ability to communicate in their first language), and different needs will point to different sets of categories.
- e. Teachers, schools and examining bodies will wish to make their own choice of categories in the light of their particular circumstances, and we would not wish to restrict their choice in any way

3.2 Even if each pupil knew only one thing under each of these headings, this would constitute a great improvement on the present situation, but we hope that many pupils would learn a great deal more than this.

3.3 *Some analytical categories.* These should not be restricted to the level of grammar, but should also include categories relevant to pronunciation and meaning. Within grammar some obvious examples would be the parts of speech categories used in the analysis of person, number and tense among inflections, morphological categories like "suffix" and "compound"; and categories for defining relations among words or word-groups (e.g. "modifier" and "subject"). For pronunciation the basic categories are probably "consonant", "vowel" and "syllable", but intonation could also be studied with the aid of simple categories like "rise" and "pause", and sounds could be further classified for e.g. length, stress and voicing. Semantic categories include the traditional ones like "synonym" and "command", but linguistics offers a wide range of other categories which could be taught, such as "restrictive", "deictic" and "presupposed".

3.4 Pupils would benefit from learning analytical categories in the following ways:

- a. Some of these categories have been part of the terminology of linguistics for thousands of years, and are now well established in books such as dictionaries and grammar books; such books will be inaccessible to school leavers if they do not understand the terminology. Moreover, many foreign-language teachers make use of such terms, so it is important for pupils to understand them properly.
- b. Analytical categories make it possible to study the grammar of a pupil's own language.

3.8 *Some major structural peculiarities of English.* This type of item would be an application of the knowledge of rules recommended in 3.6. It would require a comparison between English and at least one other language which would pinpoint differences between them, but once such differences have been identified other languages could be brought into the comparison, and pupils would thereby learn some of the ways in which languages may be expected to differ. Examples of suitable areas for comparison would be word-order, the relative importance of inflections, the types of syllable structure permitted, whether particular semantic contrasts are optional or obligatory, and writing-systems.

3.9 Such an introduction to linguistic typology would bring various benefits:

- a. It would be useful preparation for learning a foreign language, whether at school or in later life.
- b. It would reduce ethnocentricity among monolingual English speakers.
- c. It would raise the social status of pupils who could speak other languages, including members of ethnic minorities, since they could be used as "experts" on their languages; and the explicit consideration of these languages would raise the social status of the languages themselves.

3.10 *Some facts about languages of the world.* Pupils should know roughly how many languages there are (far more than the figure most people guess at), and roughly how they are distributed throughout the world - e.g. that there is no language called "African", and that a very high proportion of the world's population is multi-lingual.

3.11 The benefits of this kind of knowledge include the following:

- a. More knowledge about the linguistic background of ethnic minorities can only improve the attitudes of the majority community, and the self-respect of the minorities.
- b. This kind of knowledge could provide a link between different school subjects, notably between the language-based subjects and geography and history.
- c. It could be helpful to pupils who are likely to travel abroad for work or pleasure in later life.

3.12 *Some structural differences between standard and non-standard English, and between written and spoken English.* This type of knowledge would be another extension of the knowledge of rules recommended in 3.6.

language, but where there is no general understanding of the nature of language their presence can only be seen as a problem. This is too often the case with bilingual members of ethnic minority groups.

- h. If the citizens of this country knew more about language then there would be a better chance of our government developing sensible national policies on such matters as the treatment of ethnic minorities and the teaching of foreign languages.

1.6 These observations are similar to those made in support of "language awareness" courses in schools, and we welcome the growth of this movement (documented in, for example, the working papers of the Language Awareness working party of the National Congress on Language in Education, and in Eric Hawkins, *Awareness of language. an introduction* CUP 1984). In particular we are pleased to note the evidence produced by some experimental teaching schemes that quite sophisticated views of parts of language can be taught to children of average ability, given imagination and insight on the part of the teacher. It is also encouraging that suitable materials are becoming available in increasing quantities.

1.7 The contribution which we hope to make in this document is to outline what we see as a reasonable minimum knowledge about language which school-leavers should have. The next section defines three criteria by which this body of knowledge can be selected, and the third section lists some items of knowledge which satisfy these criteria.

## 2. Some General Criteria for Selecting Items of Knowledge

2.1 We assume that each item of knowledge should satisfy all of the following conditions: it should be teachable, it should be valuable, and it should be reliable. We elaborate on these principles below

2.2 An item is *teachable* if it can be taught, given the obvious limitations due to pupils, teachers and resources. This criterion rules out a good deal of what goes into a university course on linguistics, on the grounds that it would be too abstract for pupils and that it is unlikely that suitable, teaching materials will become available soon. As already noted, however, the success of various courses currently being taught at school level shows that a lot of potential items are *not* ruled out by the criterion of teachability. This is true not only of matters which are somewhat on the periphery of academic linguistics (e.g. the history of writing), but also of more central topics to do with the nature of linguistic structure (e.g. word-classes, alias parts of speech).

2.3 An item is *valuable* if it is important to the quality of life. In 1.5 we listed a number of problems which are due to inadequate knowledge of language, and an item can be taken as valuable if it helps to solve any of these problems, from the most "practical" (e.g. improving language-learning) to the most "academic" (improving the pupil's understanding of his or her environment). This criterion rules out any item which has no consequences for the pupil. One example of such an item would be an analysis of some exotic language without a discussion of the similarities and differences between that language and some language already known to the pupil, and without any generalisation to "language" as a whole. Another example would be an abstract outline of some theory of language structure without a good deal of discussion of its implications for the structure of particular sentences. Presumably virtually any item could be made valuable by an imaginative and knowledgeable teacher, but some items have more obvious consequences than others.

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- c. Once a small number of categories are known, other categories can be added on more easily than if none were known, as the basic principles will have been learned, but again it probably matters very little which categories are learned first.
- d. The needs of different pupils in later life will be different (for example, they may apply the categories in learning foreign languages or in improving their ability to communicate in their first language), and different needs will point to different sets of categories.
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- b. Analytical categories make it possible to study the grammar of a pupil's own language.

- c. They are also useful tools in any discussion of texts, such as would take place in a course on communication.

3.5 We recommend that the emphasis should be on understanding the categorics themselves rather than on the terms used for naming them. However, where terms are well established in non-technical publications (such as grammars and dictionaries for the lay-man), such terms should be taught in preference to spuriously "simple" terms like "doing word".

3.6 *Some rules.* (By rules we mean here general statements about particular varieties of language, including rules about what is possible in particular non-standard varieties of English). Analytical categories should be introduced in relation to rules which refer to them, and which in so doing define them. Thus rules will be needed in relation to all the levels of language mentioned above (pronunciation and meaning as well as grammar), but they could also be developed in relation to spelling, and in relation to language use (e.g. the rules for choosing between surnames and first names when addressing people, or the rules for choosing between standard and non-standard English). We recommend that some rules should be developed with reference to the pupils' own ordinary language, though we recognise the possible value of explicit rules in the teaching of both written standard English and foreign languages.

3.7. Linguistic rules are important for various reasons.

- a. If the pupils work out the rules for themselves, they learn important fundamental principles of science (relating to the formulation and testing of hypotheses, the need for sensitive treatment of data, and so on).
- b. By learning the connection between categories and rules they will learn the difference between scientific explanations and taxonomy, and will develop a less dogmatic and sterile attitude to grammatical terminology than is commonly found among educated people at present.
- c. When pupils explore their own ordinary speech and work out rules which govern it, they will find out for themselves that it is rule-governed, and interesting. This discovery will be valuable as an exercise in self-knowledge, but also as an antidote to the prevailing view in folk linguistics that only standard written English and foreign languages are governed by rules. This view leads to particularly low self-respect among non-standard speakers, which is socially divisive and demoralising.

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3.12 *Some structural differences between standard and non-standard English, and between written and spoken English.* This type of knowledge would be another extension of the knowledge of rules recommended in 3.6.

3.13 The advantages of this type of knowledge include the following:

- a. It should improve the linguistic self-respect of English-speaking pupils by setting their own ordinary language on the same level as standard written English.
- b. In so doing it is likely to make them more willing to learn written standard English, because it will no longer be seen as a threat to their own language (as it too often is at present).
- c. It should also improve their understanding of the rules of the written standard, since the latter would have to be made explicit.
- d. In comparing written standard English with their own speech, they will discover not only differences but also similarities, which again should help them in learning the former

3.14 We should like to emphasise in conclusion that we are not recommending a “back to basics” return to the grammar teaching practised in the past. The main characteristics of our recommendations which we should like to stress in this connection are:

- a. We recommend a descriptive approach, not a prescriptive one.
- b. We recommend a much more wide-ranging syllabus, including pronunciation and semantics as well as grammar, applied to different varieties of language, and with attention paid to use as well as structure.
- c. We recommend teaching which reflects developments in academic linguistics.
- d. We recommend teaching which is matched to pupils' needs and interests.