

OUR LANGUAGE PROBLEM:

A Problem Of Language Or Something Else?

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Sixteen three year olds play in the Nursery room together. All morning long they chatter together in the doll house, as they rock and feed their "babies"; shout and call to each other as they run out to climb the jungle gym; boom and sing and toot-toot at each other as they propel their tricycles down the driveway; sing a prayer together as they sit down to eat their mid-morning snack; yet among the 16, English is spoken by 5, Chinese by 3, Tagalog by 4, Spanish by 1, Bicolano 1, Leyteño 1, Ilongo 1. Each uses the speech of his own home yet all are able to communicate with each other without inhibition. They understand each other in a myriad of ways as they share their bread, or tricycle, share their ideas and imaginings thru the actual activities in which they are engaged.

It may be that there is less verbalization on the part of some of the children but fluency in communication is enhanced by the released emotional expression in the social situations which are possible for the Nursery child.

Of course, this is not so the first weeks, and sometimes months, of school, for each child brings to the school the behavior patterns which have been developed in the social-emotional climate of his own home. Being young, however, he more readily responds to the permissive atmosphere of the Nursery and develops greater receptive and responsive power.

This release of emotion possible for the young child in the Nursery, and in Kindergartens which have been set up to meet the needs of the growing and developing personality in children, is all too often misunderstood by adults in schools and homes and the community at large, as being irresponsible, "naughty" or useless behavior and therefore to be repressed. Rather, an attempt is made to effect standards of conformity based on adult concepts of what behavior should be. The effect of this negative and often punitive attitude of adults, commonly couched in soft endearing phrases tho' non the less authoritarian, together with the more direct inhibitory measures used under the guise of what we have come to call "discipline," has succeeded in so freezing the emotional assets of many individuals that power of expression is withered off at the root before it has time to find channels for its release and further development. In other words, one reason, why we have a language problem is the basic anxiety generated by the impact of cultural tabus, on all forms of emotional expression in childhood together with the pressures to produce a behavior pattern which conforms to the adult concept. This destroys the child's confidence in his own expressive power and thus the full development of personality is limited.

*The multiplicity of languages does not necessarily deter the

child in its developmental growth particularly in the growth of concepts; limitation of experiential environment does.

This marked ability in communication which is evidenced in the Nursery shows a strange toning down as we ascend the academic scale. As adults we may use the same tongue but fail quite miserably in conveying our meaning and purposes to our colleagues working in the same classrooms or office. Not alone by verbal symbols do we make our intent known but by every inflection of the voice, every movement of the body, every line of the face, every movement and shading of the eye, by our outgoingness toward others and by our withdrawingness.

A consideration of these psychosocial influences has been the basis of Nursery and Kindergarten activity along the lines of language development for the past 20 years in the Child Development of The Philippine Women's University, but much of general socialization of the child seemed lost when the children went to the grade school. The regimented formal program of class activity in the Elementary grades prevented situations from being favorable except for the "brighter" students. Two years ago a change was made in the Elementary school of the University which consisted mainly in the setting up of classrooms designed primarily for **social living**. The attempt was made to eliminate situations which would seem threatening to the child. This meant providing for greater security and satisfaction for each individual child, eliminating competitive techniques in classroom practices, removing chances of the child being exposed to ex-

pectations far beyond the level of his maturity and allowing each child to proceed at his own readiness to do so, while constantly providing new experiences which the group could enjoy and participate in together.

The emphasis of democratic values on the worthwhileness of individual personality, and group responsibility to see that the individual members of the group be given an opportunity to live and work at their best, was more readily made possible through this type of class organization.

Children developed an expressiveness which observers commented upon as being exceptional in classroom situations. Confidence and a growing ability to express themselves and their ideas was evidenced in both oral and written work. At this point I should state that no attempt was made to teach English or Tagalog in the conventional sense of "teaching." Rather the environment was an encouraging one for the use of English, tho' no child was ever checked in his use of the dialect or any other language by an adult. All teachers use English in the classroom and on the grounds when speaking to the children or when alone among themselves. The child uses what he is ready to use depending on the intricacies or urgency of what he wishes to communicate. The children talk all morning along as they study and play together in groups. Formal recitations are not held, but free conversation goes on constantly. Discussions, interviews, reporting on a piece of research, dramatizations, story telling, etc. give much practices in oral English. Stories, charts, poems, articles for the paper, let-

ter writing, poster making, notes to parents, diary and other records, group reports of excursions and other experiences, give full release and practice thru written expression in **meaningful situations.**

We do not correct the children in the early stages, considering the idea or thought to be expressed of much greater importance than the manner in which it is expressed. As the children gain facility in expression, speech forms improve especially so when the examples of teachers and other adults around them are "good English." If children have much opportunity for natural speech they will be ready by the 4th grade to perfect language **forms.**

The process goes on very naturally even as a young child learns to talk. Children in the Kindergarten often make unintelligible noises in attempts to mimic English conversations of the adults, which because they are old enough to know they don't make sense, they cover behind laughter. We accept it with laughter but mark it on the child's record. These are the children who soon begin to slam out words and finally broken phrases in English. —

But when these children do speak English in the later part of the Kindergarten period and in Grades I and II they speak it spontaneously. —

We accept these first babblings even as a mother accepts the first babblings of infancy, knowing that out of the apparently incoherent sounds, language makes its first beginnings. We make no fuss about it which might inhibit the expression.

^ To stand and recite without a quavering voice, to enter into a discussion of a problem, to be able to ask questions intelligently, calls for more than a facility in the use of words. It calls for broadening concepts, confidence in the group of which we are a member, a feeling of worthwhileness of ourselves as persons.

All of us have witnessed the effect on adults (if it has not happened actually to ourselves) who, when rising to defend a point of view to which the group was hostile, became either aggressive and combative or spoke with wavering voice and shaking limbs. If adults with a greater ability for rationalization than the child so respond how much more will the child in the class respond by withdrawing tactics, silence and timidity, or perhaps try to express himself and later sit down in confusion, less willing to try again.

• The deep feelings of inadequacy which the adolescent and young adult have to cope with are vital to his problem of adequate communication. Thus the absence of balance in expression among younger people is apparently a result of repressive culture rather than of multiple languages.

Behind this lies the recognition however, that this urgency and interest to communicate with others results from strong motivations within the child himself. The situation arising in the environment will arouse the desired response only when it answers a felt need on the part of the child.

Some of these needs are basic to the human race (the psychological implications mentioned above) others are generated by the grow-

ing awareness of the possibilities offered by the environment (the social aspects).

This brings us to the logical conclusion that by providing classrooms in which the child's and young person's emotional and social responses can thrive and by making possible a variety of experiences which are functional from the child's and young person's point of view, learning will take place much more naturally and easily than at present.

If the child finds himself in situations where English is commonly used he will use English, if in situations where Tagalog or the vernacular is used, he will use the vernacular — the constitution notwithstanding. Furthermore, he will use what is meaningful to him—all lessons in grammar notwithstanding.

To blame the use of a second language (English) for memoriter learning* seems like putting the cart before the horse. From the writers twenty years of experience with Kindergarten and primary children it seems more likely that "poor" English, the quick rate of

forgetting, the high degree of verbalization without conceptualization (readily observable at College level) may be more likely due to the memorization of language forms, a method of teaching English which is truly outmoded in this era of more complete information on how children grow and learn. Memoriter learning may also go on in the other tongue, but revising our methods in keeping with the child's growth and developmental patterns can put an end to memoriter learning in all areas, including English.

The younger the child is when he learns English the greater his facility in the use of the language, provided he learns to use the language as one eats with fork, as one rides the bicycle, as one drives an automobile; without conscious reference to the laws of Physics or mechanics, but with thoughts of the message, of the meal, of the journey." Where permissive classroom atmospheres exist and the teacher herself is a social stimulus for the child the mutuality of response developed will enhance the child's expressive power and make real learning possible.

* Jose V. Aguilar, Report on the Development of Sta. Barbara Community School. Page 609, Phil. Journal of Education, April, 1950.

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Democracy means not "I am as good as you are," but "You are as good as I am."—THEODORE PARKER

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All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy.—SMITH

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I believe in Democracy because it releases the energies of every human being.—WOODROW WILSON