

Describe the factors that influence Language Change, using examples, and attitudes towards this. Reflect on the implications of Language Change for Teaching adult literacy.

For the purpose of this essay I am going to look at and analyse 'language' from what is generally seen as its two main angles. I will initially discuss the psychological angle of language and its development. To do this I will draw upon the research and theories of psychologists such as Bruner, Sapir, Whorf, Watson, Wittgenstein, Piaget and Vygotsky. Then I am going to discuss the sociological angle of language drawing upon the research and theories of Labov, Trudgill, Eckert and Bloomfield.

I will then reflect upon these theories to see what the implications of these are on the practice of teaching adult literacy.

Language and thought are clearly both complex concepts that can be seen as separate abstracts on their own. However it is hard to argue that the two are mutually exclusive when it comes to the concept of learning. Psychologists differ greatly when it comes to what they believe the exact relationship is between the two. It can be said that there are three main theories that categorises the thinking of the psychological world.

The first view is that thought is dependent upon language. This is the view of Bruner, Sapir, Whorf, Watson and Wittgenstein. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) claimed that, "the limits of my language means the limits of my world" by this he meant that we can only think about and understand the world through language, so that if our language does not contain certain ideas or concepts, then they cannot exist for us.

Further more in Sapir-Whorf's Linguistic Relativity Theory, two theorists working in the 1920's and 1930's, the former an anthropologist and the latter a linguist came to much the same conclusions although both working entirely separately.

The theory concludes that individuals do not see or think about the world in the same way and that any native languages constrain us. For instance where as European languages treat an object as an entity some Indian languages of North America have no words, grammatical forms or constructions of expressions that refer to time at all. What they are all saying is that language determines our concepts and we can think only through the use of concepts (also known as linguistic determinism). It follows that acquiring a language is totally dependant upon first acquiring a world-view and that people with different languages have different world views and as such 'cut up' nature differently.

This idea was further illustrated in a famous experiment by Carmichael, Hogan and Walter (1932), where two different groups of people were given an identical stimulus figure yet told a different 'label' for the stimulus (i.e. Told the figure represented an entirely different object). When the subjects reproduced these figures 'blind' they drew entirely different objects.

However these theories are undermined by certain elements. Firstly the fact that it is possible to translate languages does make it appear that there must be a common denominator between different cultures, namely an understanding and therefore knowledge of a physical world, outside of language itself. It is therefore not always clear if it is language, influencing thought or even vice versa.

Following on from these views then, the second view coming out of the psychology world is quite the opposite of Whorf et al. Piaget (1968) took the opposite position, namely that language is dependant on and reflects the level of all cognitive development (i.e. Thought). Piaget was not concerned with differences in humans but merely with what is common to all individuals as they pass through the same stages of intellectual or cognitive development. He regarded intelligence as a process, something that changes over time and he thought it was the fundamental means by which human beings adapt to their environments. To this end Piaget thought that it is impossible for children to

understand a language until they understand the underlying concepts of it. Thus intelligence is the forerunner to all language and entirely independent of it.

Finally a 'third-way' was theorised by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky. Vygotsky working in the 1930's stated that language and thought start out as separate and independent activities. Vygotsky said that in very young children thought precedes language as it is pre verbalisation and the vocalisations of a baby are devoid of thought. He then goes on to theorise that there is a crucial moment at about 2 years old when language and thought 'meet and join to initiate a new kind of behaviour ... thought becomes verbal and speech becomes rational' (Vygotsky, 1962)

Moving on from the psychological view of language and thought there is also the sociological viewpoint highlighted by Labov et al. The American sociologist Labov (1970) studied the speech patterns of a sample of lower class Black children in Harlem, the main Black ghetto in New York City. Many linguistics such as Bereiter and Englemann (1966) had called Black American dialects 'substandard' however Labov argues that they are not inferior or 'substandard' to standard English, but they are simply different. One reason given for the attack by Breitner and Englemann is that speakers omit the present tense, producing such sentences as 'He a fool' instead of the standard 'He is a fool'. Labov however showed that both speakers of both dialects are in fact expressing the same ideas and more importantly the same intelligent thinking behind the speech. There are however reasons for this changing of language over regional variations.

In 2002 Labov published his work entitled 'Pursuing the Cascade Model' in which he takes on the work of Trudgill, Eckert and Bloomfield from this we can see that language spread at different rates across a geographical area. Trudgill (1974) theorised that language spread from city to city in a concentric circles pattern from one central point where the larger cities have the greatest influence on the smaller ones and so becomes the dominant language. This in

turn will influence the thinking of all who are affected by the language changes. Eckert (1999) however felt that people from similar backgrounds would be naturally more likely to 'gravitate' together and therefore be more influenced by each others language, thus taking in more socio-economic factors in the influence of language use and change.

It can be said that language itself can be plotted on one long continuum, two co-located places on this continuum will have similar languages however not identical as language is ever changing in a natural progression. Yet two places on this continuum separated far enough apart may have very different languages but with some slight similarities. The factors affecting these differences in language could be ones of ethnicity, employment, family, religion, age or other socio-economic constraints. For instance two people from the same geographical local yet with entirely different family backgrounds (due to perhaps financial constraints) could very likely speak with the same regional dialect, but very different social dialects, where as one may use Standard English, the other may continually use the vernacular.

This can then in turn itself lead to the changing of languages from not just a dialectical difference to what can become a whole new language, as with Creole and Patois. Even though as Mark Sebba (1995) in his keynote speech to the Sheffield Language Conference says "Creole takes most of its words from just one language ... creole is, from a historical point of view, a language of a special type (of its own)" we must therefore look at whether there is a defining point where a dialectical difference becomes so extreme than indeed a 'new language' is created.

So what therefore are the implications of all of these factors that influence language change on the teaching of adult literacy?

Firstly, we need to as the teacher, realise that language and thought are somehow related, we must see that language can restrict thought. If some words are not in a students vocabulary then how can they have a concept of

them, to this end we as the teacher must be aware of this and take measures to account for this. For instance, if teaching a basic class in literacy at for arguments sake a low Entry level then do not take for granted that students will understand all the words you yourself use, make sure any long words are explained and at the same time try to avoid 'dumbing down' a lesson.

We need to bear in mind a learner's background. Our learners may come from varying ethnic as well as social backgrounds. When teaching in a deprived area with perhaps a predominantly Asian group of learners we must be aware that things like 'articles' are not used in many Asian languages. So if the learners are used to hearing mothers tongues at home or in social surroundings then this will have an affect on their ability to comprehend and therefore learn English.

As teachers we must be able to tailor our own use of English to suit the needs of our learners. As stated above we must avoid the 'dumbing down' of lessons yet at the same time if it suits the needs of the learners for us to use the vernacular then we can be prepared to do this ourselves. Whatever gets the job done could possibly be best practise, as long as learning takes place.

We must as teachers be aware of the languages of our learners and keep this knowledge up to date as we have seen, language is an ever evolving phenomenon. Our learners may use slang words that to us as the teacher could mean something entirely different (i.e. fat – spelt Phat, meaning good). We therefore need to be aware of this to once again enable us to give the best for the needs of the learners. This can be done by research ourselves, time constraints allowing.

However time does not always allow us to spend it on extensive research so what we as teachers should always do is 'learn from our students'. We can use the knowledge our students already have to enable us to provide for their needs. We must endeavour to understand their own languages and thus their own thinking and in doing so we will be able to provide for their requirements in the lessons we provide.

Total Number of Words: 1,725

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