
Language Learning through Thought, Memory, Imagination, and Reading

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Abstract

The present article aims to estimate the value of language learning through a quick review of the learning process and with a focus on “accumulated knowledge” and “the ability to learn.” Following the opinions of researchers and linguists, we can also argue that the whole history of human culture – “of intelligence and morality, folly and superstition, ritual, language, and the arts” – is what makes us human. The development of language is presented in its relation to thought, and memory, with the concept of imagination added to enhance their prowess. In other words, we might say that the cultivation of imagination should be the chief aim of education. One major idea in this context is that we can learn a lot from history, where language has been used to preserve old traditions and customs, and simultaneously foster new ideas. Another seemingly debatable approach would be the idea that clarity in teaching and learning might have a significant impact on learners, and at same time function as a springboard for other academic skills. In conclusion, teachers should encourage students to be inspired and motivated to discover the powers of wonder and imagination. Reading would be the one of the best ways to experience magic because books can inspire teachers to cultivate the same human values and life lessons in our students.

Keywords: Learning, Memory, Imagination, Reading

1. Introduction

We should always remember that language is a means of communication among people. “Language is the medium by which we communicate our thoughts, one to another; its chief excellence, therefore, is perspicuity. [...] Elegance, vivacity, animation, harmony, and strength are, therefore, in comparison with perspicuity, subordinate excellencies. These qualities [...] please the imagination, they gratify the taste, and by exhibiting the object in a more attractive and striking light, they render it more impressive, and thus heighten the effect.” (Crombie, 1830, p. 30)

For centuries, great nations used water to communicate, whether it was the Nile, or whether the seas and the oceans opened passages for the Spaniards, the Portuguese, or the Brits, with one goal – to exchange culture and communicate with each other. In a PBS interview, Jessye Norman (1945-2019) reminisced about her childhood years when her father was singing in the local choir, and she was singing gospel songs at the age of four. Talking about all kinds of information she considered worth sharing, Jessye Norman mentioned the fact that they were using spirituals as well as designing quilts as means of communication among groups.

A similar way of communication can be found in the act of reading. Whether we read because we want to gain knowledge, reduce stress, find meaning in various forms of writing, train our ability to exchange valuable information, reading can provide a way to train our communication skills, and famous authors can attest to this unique advantage we get from reading.

I think that reading, in its original essence, [is] that fertile miracle of communication effected in solitude. ... We feel quite truly that our wisdom begins where that of the author leaves off. This is how Marcel Proust defined reading in his essay *On Reading*. (quoted in Maryanne Wolf, *Reader, Come Home*, 2018, p. 35)

As researchers have already proved regarding reading as a stimulating mental activity, Marcel Proust's words are definite proof confirming the inherent quality of reading which connects us to the possible forms of writing,

The language of the spoken or the written word is also the language of science and the arts. The Russian (turned French) ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev (1938-1993), who was born on a Trans-Siberian train near Irkutsk, Siberia, came to be known for his unique artistic style in which (he unraveled this secret later on in life), when he danced, he was trained to tell a story, and thus communicate with his audience through the language of his body.

And this brings us to another essential idea – that teaching is fine art, like dancing for example. The word *fine* comes from the same vocabulary related to concepts of finishing or finalizing something. The word *art* comes from Latin *artem*, itself from Greek *artizein*, 'to prepare, to fit together.' In Middle English, *art* was used to mean 'skill in scholarship and learning,' especially in liberal arts. We still have the same sense kept in *Bachelor of Arts*.

2. The Nature of the Learning Process

The nature of the learning process, according to linguists like Alex Kozulin, who compiled the introduction to *Thought and Language*, was explained as an individual accumulation of life experience or as a transmission of knowledge. In time, the English-speaking audiences became aware of Piaget's cognitive theory. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist who emphasized the importance of the education of children. In his view, the major shift was from transmission to construction, and that was possible because of the student with the outside world. When Vygotsky developed his theory based on Piaget's idea of "higher mental functions as products of the constructive teaching/learning process" his approach was considered a little bit too radical. What was he doing? In a nutshell, Vygotsky was changing the focus from "accumulated knowledge" to "ability to learn." (p. xxii)

Following in the footsteps of and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who also studied the relationship between culture and language, Vygotsky (a lawyer and a philologist) never thought that psychological inquiry should be considered as a goal in itself. Instead, he made it very clear that culture and consciousness are the foundations and the subject of inquiry.

In his scientific research, Vygotsky made a distinction between "lower," natural mental functions, such as perception, memory, and will, and the "higher," or cultural functions. He also employed the Hegelian term "superseded" to define the change of natural functions into cultural ones. His arguably interesting approach involved the connection between language and human thought, whereby we resort to a psychological tool enabling mental functions, which in their turn enhance the evolution of culture.

...Vygotsky himself was primarily interested in the development of language in its relation to thought. Language and speech occupy a special place in Vygotsky's psychological system because they play a double role. On the one hand, they are a psychological tool that helps to form other mental functions; on the other hand, they are one of these functions, which means that they also undergo a cultural development. (Kozulin, 2012, intro p. xlv)

Since language is generated by culture, their relationship can easily be explained when we take into consideration how cultural development can lead to linguistic changes in our daily routine.

There are moments in our life when we have to react to things happening around us, and we cannot react like other animals; we cannot and should not resort to flight, violence or aggression. When we express ourselves using words or symbolic images, we appeal to the understanding of two very important concepts: thought and memory. A quick analysis of these two concepts might clarify our argumentation:

Thought and memory are processes of *making* the thought content and the memory image; the pattern of our ideas is given by the symbols through which we express them. And in the course of manipulating those symbols we inevitably distort the original experience, as we abstract certain features of it, embroider and reinforce those features with other ideas, until the conception we project on the screen of memory is quite different from anything in our real history. (Rosa, A., Clark, V., & Eschholz, 2016, p. 107)

When we organize and interpret information, we rely on mental processes that allow us to understand the world around us and thought is one of these basic concepts.

The authors go on to argue that the whole history of human culture – "of intelligence and morality, folly and superstition, ritual, language, and the arts" – is what makes us human. On one hand, religion tries to define what we call morality, or moral attitudes; on the other hand, we have the world of science dealing with "facts." Herein we find language as the conveyor of knowledge in its multiple forms:

The process of envisaging facts, values, hopes, and fears underlies our whole behavior pattern; and this process is reflected in the evolution of an extraordinary phenomenon found always, and only, in human societies – the phenomenon of language. (p. 107)

In other words, when we combine the intrinsic value of what makes us special among other beings with the scientific process of invention and discovery we ultimately reach the fascinating power of scholarly judgement wonderfully embodied in the concept of language learning.

3. The High Seas of Learning

In 1978 Mary Warnock made a valuable contribution to the concept of imagination by connecting it to the concept of memory. The work is entitled *Imagination* and, after a careful examination, the author affirms that the cultivation of imagination should be the chief aim of education. The writer goes on to say that she strongly believes that “imagination plays a crucial role in thinking.” (p. 15) The purpose of her historical account, with references to Hume, Kant, Sartre, Wittgenstein, among others, is to analyze imagination by contrast to memory.

Going into more detail referring to how Hume thought that the imagination actually works, she sums it up like this:

... the memory is ‘in a manner ty’d down’ to produce its ideas in the same order as the original impressions were perceived, whereas the imagination has liberty to ‘transpose and change its ideas.’ (Warnock, 1987, p. 15)

To recap, the cultivation of imagination should be the chief aim of education. This simple concept will undoubtedly set the mind free to discover and to invent. How do we accomplish this? Various forms of sensory perceptions will enable us to utilize our smelling, touching, hearing, and tasting perceptions to learn and gain knowledge:

Language, culture, and physical learning are all derived from our senses. To know a wine it must be drunk; to know a role it must be acted; to know a game it must be played; to know a dance it must be moved; to know a goal it must be envisioned. Those whose sensory pathways are open and alert absorb more information from the environment than those whose pathways are oblivious to sensory stimuli. (Arthur Costa, *The School as a Home for the Mind*, 1991, p. 28)

By the same token, imagination, through the high seas of learning, empowers sensory stimulation to translate practical experience into language. Through the brilliant use of all our physical and mental perceptions we manage to get substance to all the efforts meant to collect, analyze, and finally deliver to our students the best and the quintessential expression of human culture in the voyage of learning discovery.

4. Lessons We Learn from History

John Dos Passos (1896 – 1970) was an American novelist who traveled a lot, especially to Europe and the Middle East, where, among other things, he learned a lot about literature. He left us a rich legacy of novels and essays that made him a major figure of the post-World War I “lost generation.” In one of his essays, Dos Passos, disillusioned by what he saw during his travels, reflected on the concept of history and its value on the new generations of Americans.

Every generation rewrites the past. In easy times history is more or less an ornamental art, but in times of danger we are driven to the written record by a pressing need to find answers to the riddles of today. We need to know what kind of firm ground other men, belonging to generations before us, have found to stand on. In spite of changing conditions of life, they were not different from ourselves, their thoughts were the grandfathers of our thoughts, they managed to meet situations as difficult as those we have to face, to meet them sometimes lightheartedly, and in some measure to make their hopes prevail. We need to know how they did it.

In times of change and danger when there is a quicksand of fear under men’s reasoning, a sense of continuity with generations gone before can stretch like a delusion of the exceptional Now that blocks good thinking. That is why, in times like ours, when old institutions are caving in and being replaced by new institutions not necessarily in accord with most men’s preconceived hopes, political thought has to look backwards as well as forward. (*The Ground We Stand on*, 2010, pp. 1-2)

The author’s non-fiction writing praised, among others, historical figures like Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin and found wisdom and relevant lessons in continuity to be learned from these giants of democratic tradition.

We can borrow the idea of continuity from the historical context and employ it in the process of language teaching. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) was a Swiss linguist – widely accepted as one of the founders of the 20th century linguistics – who pioneered the concept of continuity as essential in understanding the evolution and development of language methodology. To put the matter in an instructional perspective, the content of a vocabulary class may be carried over into a fruitful conversation, or a reading passage might lead to a written response.

Going back in time, we encounter significant moments in our history when prominent figures had a profound influence on the life of the mind. Language has been used to preserve old traditions and customs, and simultaneously foster new ideas. Language is that special form of communication which provides a method of ordering, simplifying, and making the indigestible digestible for the mind. We should never forget that we need language to build knowledge. From Socrates we learn that he was never happy with what he knew and always asked questions. We do the same in the classroom or online – we encourage students to ask questions too. The famous principle that a composition must have a beginning, a middle, and an end comes to us from Aristotle, who was also the first one who thought of parts of speech.

Cervantes gave us Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, who learn together and teach each other, just like teachers and students. By the same token, in *The Little Prince*, a fox asks the young man to tame her. When the prince admits he doesn’t know how, the fox just tells him to do it and learn by doing it. Isn’t that more or less what we do when we teach? Hemingway was the master of understatement in writings you need to read twice to appreciate them. We do the same when we review or re-write previous tasks. In Shakespeare we see a seemingly impossible combination of tragedy and comedy, two opposites glued into one witty synthesis of characters and plots, which reminds us that our classes with their learning outcomes should also be a

world of serious fun. The Bard from Stratford-on-Avon communicated his range of human experience through language, and similar examples of stories can be found in generations of writers who left their lasting impressions in their own works:

Who can read about King Midas and his golden touch without desiring to always put people before possessions?
 Who can read *A Christmas Carol* without desiring like Scrooge to honor Christmas in his heart and keep it there?
 Who can read *To Kill a Mockingbird* without wishing to be a little more like Atticus Finch – a little braver, kinder, wiser? (William Kilpatrick, Gregory Wolfe, and Suzanne M. Wolfe, 1994, pp. 23-24)

Shakespeare's power of visual imagination, readily available on stage, worked miracles in inspirational stories that defined his language prowess.

Writers use a universal language in the realm of imagination, with heroes embodying values that will be woven into our daily routine. Teachers, like writers, become role models, who, in many cultures can replace parents, and, behind each lesson they create, students will be inspired and motivated to discover the powers of wonder (remember that the word 'wonderful' contains 'wonder') and imagination.

When addressing his students, a teacher once said: "I envy you the chance to read that book for the first time." Good education implies constant reading of new material.

With several skills necessary to succeed in the classroom and in the working place as well, several linguists have considered teaching and learning outcomes from the students' perspectives. In order to overcome the difficulties presented by various factors, including culture, personal experience, prior knowledge, and proficiency levels, Almarode and Vandas (2018) argue that there are several essential practices that empower students and teachers. The authors rely on their classroom experience and draw from research done recently which led them to believe that clarity in teaching and learning would eventually increase the classroom performance and the obvious results coming from such endeavors. Knowledge learned from practice regarding clear and simple concepts can provide the necessary tools in designing useful learning experience in the classroom.

... teacher clarity makes many of the other effect sizes in the Visible Learning research possible. For example, when teachers are clear on what the students are learning, they can better select learning experiences that specifically target the necessary learning. Similarly, when teachers know why students are learning what they are learning, they can better design learning experiences that are authentic and relevant to learners.
 (https://www.google.com/books/edition/Clarity_for_Learning)

If we want our students to learn, play and grow (please read develop intellectually, socially and cognitively) to the best of our knowledge, several components should be taken into account, but the main focus still remains carefully embedded in the learning process.

Therefore, in this learning process, we find books taking the reader into another world, in which imagination and creativity are boundless, waiting for all of us to experience, each to his/her own surprise and delight. Books can inspire teachers to cultivate the same human values and life lessons in our students.

5. Conclusion

Teachers have always had a very important mission in keeping the miraculous power of language, and therefore encourage students to be inspired and motivated to discover the relevance of thought, memory, wonder, and imagination in the learning process. To accomplish such a challenging task, reading would be one of the best ways to experience magic because books can inspire teachers to cultivate the same human values and life lessons in our students. To which experienced educators would add a special touch with their ingenuity and love of learning.

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