

Tony final

The Changing English Language Needs of Education in the 21st Century

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I would like to present a personal view on this topic, addressing it through four areas, changes in language, changes in education, changes in society, and changes in the roles of teachers and learners. It is a subjective perspective, which, I hope, may encourage teachers to respond.

a) Language Change. To what extent is English changing within itself? We know its role as a world language is increasing and that in almost all areas of contemporary life, English is the dominant language. Like all languages, English has exhibited change on many levels, lexical and grammatical, over the centuries. Perhaps each generation thinks it is the one which is experiencing the most rapid change, but there is a case for the current generation to be the leader in this respect. Dictionary compilers tell us that the rate of growth of new words is tremendous. But is there anything more fundamental in the way that the language is changing other than changes in lexis, with new terminology for concepts, ideas, artefacts, slang, jargon? To what extent is it our role to bring this new language to our students' notice?

A second area of change is grammatical change, and at one level this is manifested in the kind of 'slipshod' errors that seem to be current, even within what was formerly regarded as a bastion of correctness, the BBC. I mean such uses of language as:

"... would of liked" (and not 'would have liked'. Obviously, not so apparent in speech.)
"... a group of visiting reporters from the EU have arrived" (and not 'has arrived'. The pull of the closest noun rather than the headword of the nominal group.)
"...less time and less opportunities (and not 'fewer' opportunities. Perhaps I am fighting a rearguard action here.)

Are attitudes to correctness, conforming to established rules, changing? The language of western pop culture and the (very personal view here!) truly atrocious use of language in some 'rap' numbers is an instance. (Most can't be regarded as 'songs' as the musical element is about as far from some established 'norms' of music as the words are from linguistic norms. However, being an Elvis fan, I fondly remember the words from 'One Night' – "I ain't never did no wrong". How many errors there?) To what extent are we, as language teachers, merely purveyors of the passive, providers of grammatical paradigms, markers of mistakes, or are we bearers of all that language brings with it in terms of 'culture' – the belief, values, and artefacts that represent culture? And how far should we advocate/ initiate/accept such changes?

Or is there anything more fundamental, perhaps in the way that language is used to present information? One only has to look at the use of language for political purposes, the classic 'collateral damage' syndrome to see how dangerous and manipulative this can be. The relationship between 'ideas/thoughts' and the language used to express them is

relevant, but far too complex for such a short article. But does saying something mean it can come to exist? In other words, does language create reality? When a certain Western leader seems ready to unleash a modern war and all that that means because he is ‘a lover of peace and a defender of freedom and democracy’, does that not introduce a kind of Orwellian dimension to words and meaning? How susceptible is the wider public at large to this? Does such language have the power to change peoples’ way of thinking? And when a certain Middle Eastern state is regarded by the West almost as a paragon of government because it has the label ‘democracy’, as if this term somehow compensates for the wanton and wilful destruction of lives, property and a people’s aspirations to statehood, for a blatant apartheid system, the disregard of any norms of human rights, and a constant refusal to implement any UN Resolutions, what, indeed, is a word?

b) Changes in Education. Here again, technology is rapidly changing the landscape. The accumulation of knowledge is now so vast, that our role is not to impart information so much as provide the tools to enable that information to be found. Education, etymologically speaking, is a process of leading outwards, into the realms of the new, and although there may not be any changes in that fundamental approach, the nature of the ‘realms’ may be changing and the nature of what is ‘new’ also. As far as our students here at SQU are concerned, priorities in terms of educational content seem now to be concerned with application, first of the kinds of ‘knowledge’ that can be used for employment after graduation, and secondly, of the skills, attitudes and aptitude that can persuade employers to give a student an opportunity to learn new skills and knowledge. Perhaps in terms of our priorities, it is the latter that should be first, perhaps almost more so for English than for the content knowledge of their specialist areas. So conversation and discussion procedures, problem-solving techniques, mental ‘thinking on your feet’ strategies, skills of re-phrasing, evading, turning answers into questions, and other such speaking skills, may need to be given higher priority?

c) Changes in Society. It is difficult for an ‘outsider’ to comment on this, when one doesn’t have immediate access to what concerns people regarding Omani society. But changes are evident even to outsiders, not just in terms of bricks and concrete, roads, and shopping malls, etc. but in terms of student behaviour, driver behaviour, social problems that are discussed in the press and on TV, and other discernible features. Is it the role of an educational institution to reflect such changes in society, or to lead and direct these changes? If the latter, what is the role of English, and we, the English teachers, in this respect? We have all faced this dilemma to a greater or lesser extent with discussions in class, whether *ad hoc* ones that arise out of something in a text book or something a student says, to more formal ‘debates’ when students may take up an argument that they do not personally subscribe to for the sake of discussion. Is that using language for ‘subversion’?

d) Changes in Roles of Teacher and Student

The picture of the teacher at his/her desk, textbook open, expounding to the students, all sitting in rows, all attentive, absorbing all this new information, is a false one for the 21st century, and, probably, has been a false image for many teachers through the centuries. I would imagine that all good teachers followed a modified Socratic process of question

and elicitation, rather than displaying their own knowledge. The role of a language teacher must continue to be, to a certain degree, that of a moderator of correctness and accuracy, but also a manager of learning, a director of information-seeking, a stimulus for thought and a primer for motivation. Where is this paragon? In your own office perhaps?

Will teacher skills not have to change with technology? The old adage says that it is not that computers will replace teachers, but that teachers with a range of skills in, and knowledge of, computers will replace those teachers who don't have this. However, does this not belittle or undermine the essential humanistic value of an inspirational teacher? We must all have some recollection of a teacher at school/college who wielded a huge influence on our thinking, and even perhaps on the direction our lives followed as a result. I think we should not underestimate this human side of teaching, which I would maintain, is still largely an interaction between personalities. There may well be changes in procedures, as a result of logistical factors relating to class size, use of learning materials and the incorporation of technology into the learning process, but one would hope that the cut and thrust of classroom interaction is still the norm.

The student role is also changing, with far more emphasis on group or individual responsibility for learning, and for more sharing of ideas and knowledge among students. We all know that at times learners seem to 'learn' more from their peers than from the teacher, and the process of students shaping both what they learn and the way in which they learn it will continue and develop. Again, the rapid growth of technology will surely mean far more individualised work in the future. Perhaps there is a need for a change in the way that students' work is assessed and evaluated, so that there is no benefit in blindly copying from peers but that students themselves participate more in evaluating their own and their colleagues' work. Changing the attitude from 'getting a good mark by whatever means possible' to 'doing the best I'm capable of and stretching my own ability' is perhaps a valid educational aim, and one which needs the support of society at large. Many students perhaps appreciate and conform to this view, but it does seem to be true that at present the mark given seems to be what concerns students most.

So, what is the purpose of this short article? Basically, that change is inevitable, change is constant, change is unstoppable, but we need to be aware that not all change is intrinsically more valuable, and that we may at times have to re-define the status quo so that change deemed as undesirable can be deflected.

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