
New publications ... Nuwe publikasies

Reviews

David Corson

The Lexical Bar. Oxford: Pergamon, 1985. (117pp.)

This book examines the role played by the vocabulary of English as a mediating factor in educational success and failure.

The book is exploratory. Corson sees language as the central achievement necessary for success in schooling, since achievement depends on the child's ability to display knowledge (p.1.). He draws on Bruner, Austin and Popper in establishing the centrality of language in intellectual development and cognitive processing, and then proceeds in a very disciplined way through three stages. The first is problem identification. In the second stage, a tentative theory is postulated. In the third stage, the validity of this theory is examined by means of error elimination tests, and it is then reformulated. In a climate often bedevilled by unproductive controversy, Corson would like to see educational research fostering review and improvement through disciplined criticism. He is merely setting the first cycle in motion.

There are nine chapters. In the first, the need for a cross-disciplinary theory is established. Chapter two articulates insights from a range of disciplines in a tentative formulation of such a theory. The main points are:

- There are many word meanings we can hardly do without if we want to communicate readily within specialist knowledge areas.
- It is a characteristic of English that most of its specialist vocabulary is Graeco-Latin in origin.
- Such specialist words begin to enter children's performance vocabulary, if at all, during adolescence.

- Many words in English possess characteristics that make them seem bizarre, highbrow and difficult to language users who are not exposed to early and regular contact with them.
- The closed-role system of some peer groups may cause the specialist vocabularies of the school to be regarded with contempt and aversion.
- Some language users do not identify with some vocabularies.
- Structuring patterns play a role in verbal storage systems in the brain; words may be analysed by access codes into units consisting of their bases or stems, with affixes stripped.
- Some variations at quantitative and qualitative levels are reported in research on social group lexical selection.
- Marked educational improvements have been reported for children who have followed programmes focusing on the etymology and word relationships of English.

In short, it means that there is a lexical bar in the English lexicon which makes it difficult for some groups to have access to the semantically precise knowledge categories which are essential for understanding the secondary school curriculum.

Chapter three provides a fascinating historical account of the erection and maintenance of the lexical bar through educational and social means and of the implications it has had for social and intellectual advancement.

In Chapter four, Corson shows that the lexical bar is currently reinforced because the young speakers of some social groups do not "identify" with certain sets of words because their social background makes them view these as irrelevant.

Chapter five marks the start of the third stage. It

records Corson's empirical investigations in Britain and Australia aimed at testing the lexical bar theory. He developed two measuring instruments for the purpose: the Measure of Passive Vocabulary and the G-L Instrument. He also used cloze. The procedures adopted are carefully outlined and the findings presented. Although these findings do not establish a clear cause and effect relationship, they do document a strong link between an active written and oral access to the specialist lexis of English and educational success or failure.

Language planners and those involved in curriculum studies should take careful note of chapter six. Evidence of the ability to use words remains and should remain a principal instrument of evaluation within the educational selection process. However, this should highlight for us certain hidden inequities within the education system. A telling illustration is provided on p.81 in the answers to the same question given by two pupils of matched reasoning ability. One pupil seems decidedly inferior in reasoning ability to the other because his answer lacks precision, explicitness and syntactic cohesion. He is a victim of the lexical bar. Ways must be found of giving access to alternative conceptual frameworks so that pupils like this will not mistakenly be viewed as innately inferior and unsuitable for further education. This may involve allowing more time at high school for children whose social or cultural backgrounds place them at a disadvantage, as they may accelerate in their lexical development a year or two later than others.

Chapter seven is largely exploratory. It focuses on the relationship between lexical structuring patterns and verbal storage systems in the brain. Researchers will find that Corson provides a useful overview of psycholinguistics in presenting his model of the arrangement of the mental lexicon.

In chapter eight he explores the ways in which processing difficulties may hinder even passive vocabulary acquisition and suggests ways in which an individual's learning of polymorphemic words may be made easier. He firmly contends that the crucial factor is a learning environment which provides stimulating and appropriate non-linguistic experiences, affording rich encounters with words in context so their rules may be deduced. This view will be of special interest to proponents of English Across The Curriculum and those teach-

ing technical and scientific subjects—to all who have seen the role that comprehension plays in success or failure.

Chapter nine presents a revised theory of the lexical bar which accords a role to ethnicity, questioning social class as an accurate predictor of lexical orientation on its own. It also indicates that word learning is not affected by the etymological provenance of words, and that there is more to difficult texts than that they contain words difficult in access. Words of Graeco-Latin origin principally but not exclusively present processing difficulties in the mental lexicon. However, a rich language environment in the school could promote all children's lexical sophistication.

This book provides a useful model for research and presents exciting challenges to researchers and policy makers. My one quibble is that a book which offers such useful insights into the lexical bar should itself be unnecessarily obscure. It is difficult to read.

E. Ridge

William Rowlinson

Personally Speaking ... Teaching Languages for Use. Oxford University Press: 1985. (Paperback, 150 pp.)

This book attempts to re-assess the objectives of second language teaching today. Although the author uses the various French courses taught in Britain as the basis of his study, most of his criticism and conclusions are relevant to second language courses generally, including those in South Africa.

From the sub-title: *Teaching Languages for Use*, it is apparent that Rowlinson favours a communicative approach. However, this book does not suggest new ways of teaching communicatively, but attempts to give a perspective of old as well as more recent methods in the light of the professed aims of second language teaching. For this reason, it is divided into two parts: *Ends* and *Means*.

In Part one, *Ends*, the author identifies what he considers to be the major problem in second language teaching today: "the lack of clarity about