

## Ways of Seeing or Perception and the Teaching of English

The study of creativity remains a fascinating, yet controversial, subject to the psychologist. Despite the many pitfalls in this highly complicated area of study and the endless arguments concerning definitions, methodology and measurement which bestrew the psychological literature on creativity, there are some psychologists who have gone beyond the analysis of the concept and have attempted to apply it to the real situation. Torrance, for example, not only analyses the measurement of creative abilities but also explores in depth their relationship with personality, with social and mental adjustment, and with intellectual factors. One of his aims is to help teachers to recognise and guide creative ability more effectively and to achieve the most productive environment for the fostering of creativity in children and students. However, a whole literature has grown up in other disciplines of which most of the researchers into the psychology of creativity seem to be unaware. The extensive work on creative writing, for example, by poets and writers (David Holbrook, Ian Serraillier, Ted Hughes) or by teachers of English (Creber) goes unmentioned in psychologists' reports. As a psychologist turned English teacher I have attempted in a very small way to bridge this gap.

Before embarking on a scheme to direct and enlarge the sensitivity of children's perceptions, the English teacher should have thought out the basic principles which underlie his methods. There are many answers to the question 'Why teach English?' which vary with time and which reflect changes in educational theory. Four have been chosen here, both for their relevance to the theme of perception, and for their contribution to English teaching in general. Despite the categorisation, however, it is necessary to be aware at the same time of the danger of creating artificial boundaries since each of the principles interrelates with the others.

Firstly, the English teacher is dealing with language in its various aspects, and he is concerned with fostering in his pupils articulateness, literacy, verbal and written expression. Such skills imply at a deeper level the ability to understand and be understood, the ability to listen to others and really hear what they say. In this category, which clearly involves much formal teaching, the teacher can use the mechanics of reading and writing as a means ultimately towards the expansion of communication and understanding.

Secondly, the emotional experience of reading literature is one which the teacher can share with pupils and, through its exploration of this inner world of the emotions, is

one which can be related to the psychological growth of the child and the full development of his personality. Through his experience of reading imaginative literature the child can be helped to see the external world through new eyes.

Thirdly, since writers are often involved in expressing psychological conflict, literature can lead the child to a deeper understanding of himself, can give him insight into the mystery of life and some understanding of the darker, irrational forces within him. Children may be shown indirectly the existence of destructive threats to the self through the symbolism of myths, fairy stories and folk tales.

Finally, through his study of English, the child can be brought to a fuller understanding of others, can develop a sense of empathy and can gain a historical perspective on the present and the past. In this category, the English teacher should aim to free children from rigid prejudices and repetitive modes of thought. This aspect of teaching involves the development of critical appraisal and an evaluation of the quality of things, events and people which are perceived.

It is my intention in this article to explore one aspect of English teaching - its role in forming new ways of seeing, its function in guiding perception. Already, in discussing the principles which underlie one particular style of teaching, I have used words like 'insight', 'seeing through new eyes', 'perspective'. In describing a poet's work we may talk of his 'vision', and how his way of 'seeing' material things suggests immaterial relationships. At every level, in fact, humans perceive the world symbolically since what is experienced through the senses is translated in the mind's eye. The English teacher has the task of helping children to transform what they have perceived into the medium of language. 'A thought can be compared to a cloud which sheds a shower of words'. So Vygotsky uses an image to express the way in which an individual translates the abstract idea or the sensory experience - an image present in its entirety in the mind - into an unfolding pattern of words. 'The last day of the holiday' may exist in

the child's mind as a fusion of images and memories - the empty beach, rain on the water, the pursuit of clothes over the sand as the wind blows them away, a feeling of sadness - a total experience. To the child struggling to find words to express such impressions the teacher can offer help in describing the experience by keeping the child's eye on the object and by allowing imagination to transcend the observation. The child's experience is real, but too often the images become confused as he tries to describe the many elements which are condensed in his thought into the linear order of words, whether written or spoken. The English teacher can try to facilitate this process of expression without destroying the authenticity of the child's experience or imposing his own perceptions on the child's view. In a sense he acts as a catalyst.

The principles of Gestalt psychology have given us insight into the fact that perception is an active process consisting of the organisation and structuring of experience. The principles of figure and ground, and of organisation can be extended far beyond the perception of geometrical figures. The context, for example, in which a painting is set can influence the way in which we actually see it, as John Berger so strikingly illustrates through his reproduction of Van Gogh's 'Wheatfield with Crows'. The painting is disturbing when seen for the first time, but when we are told that this is the

last painting which Van Gogh painted before he killed himself, the atmosphere becomes darker, the crows more menacing, and the whole symbolism of the painting is perceived in a new way. It is possible to have all the elements of a pattern, all the words of a poem, before one's eyes and still not actually 'see' it.

I have written that the English teacher should act like a catalyst in helping the child to express his perceptions in words. Perhaps this obscures the real meaning of the teacher's role as a guiding force. If we accept that perception, far from being a passive reaction, is positively shaped by the context in which we are, it is clear that the English teacher can influence the child's perceptions either through literature or through his own sensitivity to the child as a person, or he can inhibit and limit the child's vision. Creber, in writing of this need to foster the child's imaginative insight, has borrowed Blake's phrase that imagination in the child can 'cleanse the doors of perception' and enable him to see new things even within his own familiar surroundings. Creber does not confine himself to general statements about the moulding of perception, but presents a carefully worked out scheme, based on reading and writing, through which the teacher can progress from immediate experience to more complex levels of perception.

In a similar vein, Ted Hughes gives his own view of how children can be stimulated to write or say what they really mean, in his words, 'as part of the search for self-knowledge'. To begin with, in writing a poem you have to be sure that the words 'live', and living words tend to be those that relate to the five senses or to be words that 'act and seem to use their muscles'. His advice to the young writer is to forget the words but see the object of the poem as he writes it - either literally or in the imagination; his suggestion is to 'keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words'. Stimulus can come from poems that are relevant to the child's theme as well as from his own familiarity with the experience. Topics selected by Hughes range from specific themes which provide limits within which the child can find a memory or experience, such as 'wind and weather' or 'meet my folks', to wide themes like 'words and experience' which explore the function of words as tools to capture the meaning of significant experiences. Hughes' book is stimulating but probably most effectively used within the confines of a framework such as Creber's.

It was with these two approaches to the teaching of English in mind that I attempted to put my ideas on perception into practice. With a fusion of Hughes and Creber I consciously tried to work on the senses of pupils in a comprehensive school. Results were varied and I cannot claim that the method was a success with every child. However, response to the approach from boys in a low ability class of the third year was particularly good and three of their poems can serve as illustrations. With them I read 'Humming Bird' by D.H. Lawrence. We talked about the poem, discussed the meaning and then the boys wrote down the words which most struck them. I showed them pictures of a lizard, a humming bird, a crocodile and various dinosaurs to illustrate the poet's idea of looking at a creature 'through the long telescope of Time'. Among others, the boys chose 'primaeval dumb', 'heave of matter', 'jabbing, terrifying monster', 'whizzing', 'stillness' as phrases which they liked. They were then asked to write a story or poem about going back in time in a time machine. They had first to

describe what they heard - they had to imagine that it was dark - and then, as light broke, to describe what they saw. Much of what they produced was uninspired but the boys who did try to use ears and eyes in their imagination wrote the best pieces. Three poems were, I thought, outstanding for boys whom the school has classified as being of 'lesser ability'. Paul used images from Lawrence to stimulate his own vision of the primaeval swamp but the poem came vividly alive in its own right. Ian reads only haltingly and spelled nearly every word wrongly but his lizard which wailed like two drums with a tongue whispering against the air revealed that although he is 'low stream and non-academic' he too is capable of imaginative perceptions given the right conditions. Stephen uses the sense of hearing most effectively as he contrasts 'screams and distant shrills' with the line 'Then all went quiet and still and cold'. It is interesting to see how he, like Paul, fuses Lawrence's perceptions into his own.

### **THE TIME MACHINE by Paul**

Stepping out, into some unmeasured zone of time,  
The smell of vast damp forests, swelling  
Round, the thump of huge feet crashing down on the  
Succulent earth, the hellish cry of a skin-covered bird  
Its long beak rowed with tearing teeth snapping at damp  
Primaeval air. The splash of vast unseen monsters plunging  
Into still dark water, the roar of fighting animals tearing at  
Each other in a piercing rage, the creak of vast trees  
Plunging to the ground, the sight of dumb awful creations  
Sliding across the surface of a dark steaming sea, the  
Hot boiling ponds spread around the forest, inanimate  
Lizards lying bloodily on the bank, being eaten by a  
Terrifying monster, the sight made me sick. I stepped  
Back into the machine and went whizzing through  
The channels of time.

### **TIME MACHINE by Stephen**

I stepped out of the time machine  
And walked along the eerie ground  
Screams and distant shrills occurred  
And lizards swarmed the greyish sand.

Giant birds flew across the skies  
Enormous monsters fought their foes  
Then all went quiet and still and cold  
Till an emerging beast ended all silence.

I was scared at what I had seen there  
And the dense misty fog was swarming the land  
So I ran back to my time machine  
And disappeared through the bluish sky.

## TIME SLIP by Ian

I was going through Time of my time machine  
going through space and down into a forest  
where there was many strange sounds  
I had gone back 5000 years in time

Before I got out of my time machine  
I heard strange sounds like someone  
whistling as an echo, strange people was clapping  
and everything echoed.

A lizard was walking on a tree  
branch you could hear its tongue  
whispering against the air and  
when he called he sounded like two drums.

I looked at the sky. It was bright red  
And the thunder and lightning and the  
Rain pattering the tree leaves and  
the bushes are all different colours.

In evaluating the hypothesis that the English teacher can consciously direct the perceptions of pupils I would conclude that the results of the experiments confirmed it only to a certain extent, and the method worked only with a proportion of the children. Again, a boy whose senses were awakened by one situation would not necessarily be stimulated by another. It could be argued that the method omits the importance of the relationship between teacher and pupil, the atmosphere in the classroom and the significance for the children of the material chosen by the teacher. On the other hand, I would claim that the criticisms can be accommodated within the principles which underlie the method. Gestalt principles indicate that the individual's past experience and present mood, attitudes and emotions are all factors which influence his potential for sensing and thinking. The material which the teacher uses must, if it is to be effective, be relevant to the needs of the pupils. All we can predict is that a certain image or stimulus *may* facilitate a new way of seeing. Ted Hughes talks of words as tools with which we try to register our experience. To capture perceptions, to transform them into words, is of fundamental importance in expressing what it is to be human.

### References

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*, 1973, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth, Middx.

Creber, J.W.P. *Sense and Sensitivity*, Unibooks.

Hughes, Ted. *Poetry in the Making*. Faber 1968.

Torrance, *Guiding creative talent*. Prentice-Hall 1964