

## **Renewing acquaintance with James Britton**

On a spring Saturday in early March, the London Association for the Teaching of English ran a day conference at the Institute of Education on the work and legacy of James Britton. A fine, large, black-and-white photograph of a pipe-smoking language and education pioneer looked down on a gathering of nearly 100. Some had known and worked with Britton in the 1950s and 60s; others had had only recently completed training in the institution where his ideas had influenced the practice of generations of English teachers. Others still, myself included, had less direct knowledge of the man and the institution.

In the first session of the conference, Tony Burgess reflected on Britton's life and ideas, while Myra Barrs explained how Britton had influenced her work as a teacher and adviser. Britton had been the forming hand behind both LATE and NATE, and the 'shuttle' between classroom and theory that he practised remains a key principle. His work exemplified a distinctive research and pedagogic tradition that accepted the intrinsic interest and importance of children's language, the study of which moved from evidence to theory and back to evidence. The quotations from children that feature so frequently in Britton's work are not just illustrations of his thinking but part of the thinking. His ideas, particularly as expressed in *Language and Learning* (1970) and in his contributions to the Bullock report *A Language for Life* (1975), and as developed in the *Primary Language Record* of 1989 and the *Language across the Curriculum* movement, exemplify his method of observation and theoretical construction. They have had a profound effect on educational theory and practice - in Canada as much as in the UK -and are still influential despite the current regime of reaction and quantification.

Britton believed that understanding the relationship between language and thought was key to understanding how children gain language fluency. In chapter 2 of *Language and Learning*, he uses the work of Luria and Vygotsky, then little known in the UK, to examine the development of thought and language. He saw language as a means of building up a representation of the world. An inward running commentary on experience that operates alongside social speech becomes internal speech: a retrospect that enables a prospect. 'It is typically human, he wrote, 'to be insistently preoccupied

with this world representation, this retrospect and prospect that a man constructs for himself.' Speech thus precedes writing, and children's written language develops from and alongside their talking.

Priorities for the classroom follow this view of language. Britton insisted that language in the classroom should be used for real purposes, one of the most important of which is listening. Myra Barrs recalled that Britton had been a modest speaker and active listener: his colleagues remarked on his intent yet warm attention on the speaker and his encouraging: "Go on."

Britton developed the concept of the Participant and Spectator roles of language: the speaker/thinker acts on the world by means of the representation and acts on the representation itself. From this point of view, literature does not occupy a different realm from other language, in which it is to be studied in order to develop critical judgement; expressive and poetic writing and reading are natural functions of the spectator role. The concept of the spectator role thus brings literature into touch with processes in the everyday life of young people. Britton's overall theory of language as functioning within participant-spectator roles along a transactional-expressive-poetic spectrum gives a rationale for all aspects of English teaching. It also provides a perspective for enquiries into classroom language. His legacy is a focus on process and on the relation between learning and instruction.

The second part of the morning was devoted to several workshops. The workshop I attended, run by Barbara Bleiman of the English and Media Centre, used Britton's concept of the classroom as a place of process rather than merely of instruction. Barbara suggested that literacy across the curriculum depends on teachers' understanding the value of expressive talk in learning. Working in groups of two or three, we read the introductory sentences of several short stories and talked about which ones we liked most and least, progressively eliminating stories until we had decided which to read as a whole. The sense of personal investment was exciting and involving; the emphasis was on natural responses and preferences rather than on instant recourse to assessment requirements. A writing exercise based upon William Carlos Williams' poem *The Red Tractor* allowed several kinds of creative response. Mine picked

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up the nature of the session:

The interactive whiteboard  
is turned off.  
We sit  
in groups of two or three  
writing a poem about an object.

In the final session of the conference, a panel including Simon Clements and Douglas Barnes, both of whom had worked with James Britton, spoke about his importance. According to Douglas Barnes, one learned from Britton how to be a person as well as a teacher. Could there be a better account of the legacy of a seminal figure in the study of language and the teaching of English?

John Hodgson

Editor, *English in Education*