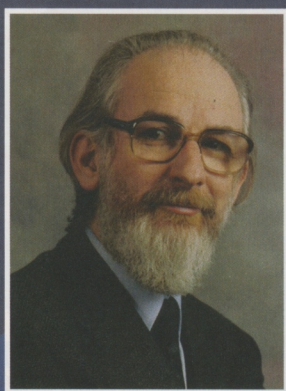


Any English questions?



A series in which *Classroom* invites questions for a different guest respondent each term.

Our guest for this 'Language' themed issue is Professor David Crystal, eminent writer, academic, lecturer and broadcaster on a wide range of subjects relating to English Language studies. His books and lectures on the English language, include his two encyclopedias for Cambridge University Press, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* and *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Recent books include *By Hook or By Crook: a Journey in Search of English* (2007) and *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* (2008).

1. Is there any real evidence that improving pupils' knowledge about language (KAL) impacts positively on their use of language?

There's no necessary connection. I always use an analogy: I have a friend who's a brilliant car mechanic, but a terrible driver. An intellectual knowledge doesn't necessarily transfer into skills, because other factors are involved, such as, in the car case, sensitivity to other road users. On the other hand, it's common sense that the more we know about our car, the more we're likely to take care of it and drive it well.

'...grammatical parsing and terminology isn't enough.'

I'm in no doubt that the more one develops a KAL, the more one's language skills improve – remembering that we are talking about all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing. But it has to be the right KAL. Knowledge of grammatical parsing and terminology isn't enough. It has to be semantic and pragmatic knowledge – as argued in my *Making Sense of Grammar* (Longman 2004). Experimentally, some child language acquisition studies have shown that an awareness of metalanguage correlates positively with language development.

2. If we think with language and our thinking is dependent on language then should we have vocabulary lessons before we worry about English lessons?

Thinking isn't totally dependent on language, as anyone can show in a simple experiment. Reflect now on the route you take from home to work – your front door, the street you walk along, and so on. You can retrace your whole journey without using a single word. There are several types of thinking that don't require language.

Having said that, the emphasis on vocabulary is certainly important. It's been a neglected area, really. People have focused on grammar to the exclusion of semantics. But vocabulary can't be left to chance (as it usually is). There is so much of it (100K words in a small college dictionary) that it needs careful handling. I've a couple of papers which explore this further. See for example, 'Sense: the final frontier' at http://www.davidcrystal.com/David_Crystal/education.htm

3. I was told on a recent course that for the first time ever in educational history a generation of schoolchildren might be doing more writing outside of school (computers, email, blogs, texting etc) than inside school. In the light of this 'revolution', what are your views on the increasing text-messaging/Americanisation of the English language that is consequently taking place?

‘...the more kids text, the better their literacy scores.’

This is probably true. But the point to note is that it's a different kind of writing – or rather, kinds. The constraints on writing successful emails, blogs, texts, tweets, and so on, are different, and require good stylistic management, just as one needs in relation to traditional genres of written expression. Different notions of audience are involved, too, especially in relation to the anonymity of much of the e-medium.

It's not right to link texting and Americanization. Texting in fact began in the UK, and it took the US five years before it began to catch up. I talk about this and other issues in my *Txtng: the Gr8 Db8* (OUP, 2008). The research is showing very clearly that texting is linguistically beneficial: the more kids text, the better their literacy scores.

4. Why is that the ending 'ise' is known as the 'original' English version of the common American ending 'ize', when I distinctly remember that we always used 'ize' at school (50 years-ish ago)? Which usage came first?

I've discussed this whole issue on my blog: 'On *-ise* vs *-ize*' – see <http://david-crystal.blogspot.com> for 24 March 2007. It isn't a question of one or other being original, as both came into English at about the same time. In the UK the issue is stylistic, with Oxford University Press opting for *-ize*, and various other publishers opting for *-ise*. The UK ratio is approximately 3:2 in favour of *-ise*. *-ize* is standard in the USA; *-ise* in Australia. The reasons for the divergent development are outlined in the blog post.

5. If language is inexorably evolving – and not always to our personal taste – what should we teach our students? E.g. is the distinction between *less* and *fewer* worth making if it's likely to disappear anyway? (Other examples might be *substantial* and *substantive*, *un/interested*...)

I would teach them about the way language is evolving, so that they understand what the issues are. They need to know about questions of standard vs nonstandard, appropriateness, taste, and so on. It isn't possible to generalize about usage issues. Each one has to be understood in its own terms and taken on its

merits. The semantic distinction between *un-* and *dis-interested*, for example, is very different from the one raised by *less/fewer*. There are cases where the former causes ambiguity; there are no cases where the latter does. To understand the latter you need some grammatical awareness (of the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns); to understand the former, you don't. And so on. An excellent explanatory guide is Pam Peters' *Cambridge Guide to English Usage*.

‘The notion of good or bad simply doesn't arise...’

6. Do you believe that there are only varieties of English or are there better and worse versions of the language?

A variety is a kind of language used conventionally in a particular social situation, so the notion of good or bad simply doesn't arise. If you don't like the social situation, of course, that's a different (nonlinguistic) matter. For example, criminal cant is a variety of English which does its job perfectly well. Conversely, some varieties carry more social prestige than others, e.g. standard, literary.

It's certainly possible to evaluate the efficiency with which people use a variety. Audibility and clarity of articulation would be critical features of BBC announcing, for example. If, then, one listened to a BBC announcer and was unable to understand part of what was being said, this would have to be called poor performance. A variety must always be judged in its own terms.

For more on this viewpoint, see my *The Stories of English* (Penguin 2004). ■

For the next 'Any English Questions' our guest will be Adrian Beard, a chief examiner for English literature and author of *Texts and Contexts*. He will answer questions on the broad subject of teaching English literature. Send your questions – light or heavy, passionate or flippant – to classroom@nate.org.uk with **Classroom questions** on the subject line.