This teaching guide concerns a course that should lead the student to realize the importance of language to the individual and to the culture by exploring the possible origins of language, the causes and patterns of change, and the process through which language is learned. The guide contains the following: I. Performance Objectives; II. Course Content; III. Teaching Strategies; IV. Student Resources; and V. Teacher Resources. (DB)
Authorized Course of Instruction for the Quinmester Program

Language Arts: The Nature of Language

5111.16
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5187.02

English, Vocabulary

Division of Instruction 1971
The Nature of Language

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English, Vocabulary

Written by Ann Hendrick

for the

DIVISION OF INSTRUCTION
Dade County Public Schools
Miami, Florida
1971
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Miami, Florida 33132

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Course Number

5111.16  Course Title: THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE
5112.16  Course Description: This course should lead the student to
5113.16  realize the importance of language to the individual and to
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5115.16  the causes and patterns of change, and the process through
5116.16  which language is learned.
5187.02

I. Performance Objectives

A. Given the steps through which a person learns his language, the
   student will examine the process.

B. Given a theory on the origin of language, the student will spec-
   ify limitations of the theory.

C. Given examples of patterns of changes in the English language,
   the student will formulate a hypothesis for the cause.

D. Given a list of words, the student will investigate the origins
   and changes in meaning.

E. Given the study of The Nature of Language, the student will
   construct a new method of communication.
II. Course content

Perhaps of all the creations of man language is the most astonishing.
Lytton Strachey, Words and Poetry

Language, man's major form of communication, differentiates man from other animals. We are born with no language but a cry, but in a few short years we are able to make our wants, needs, other speaker of the same language; we develop a vocabulary and a style that is ours; we learn to read those peculiarly shaped forms on paper so that past thoughts are still available to us for discussion.

Where did this phenomena on language come from? How did man first learn to speak? There is no definitive answer, for each theory has its limitations. But even without this knowledge on the origin of language, it is still a miracle that each man learns to communicate with a language—and some with more than one. Even more amazing is that the language learning process is the same in all languages so that by the time a child is six to eight years old he has mastered the major constructions of his language, regardless of its "complexity."

Language, however, is not static; it is constantly changing in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. The change is so gradual that no one generation realizes how it has occurred, but this knowledge is vital if one is to understand all the possible meanings a writer may have in mind when he uses a particular word or phrase. This knowledge also helps the student to understand why English sometimes has some of its peculiar spellings—that these spellings were phonetic during one period of the development of language.

With these concepts in mind, the course will include the following:

1. that every child goes through the same process in learning a language: whimpering and crying, babbling, imitating sounds, and speaking;
2. that there are several theories for the origin of language: gesture, ding-dong, pooh-pooh, yo-heave-ho, bow-wow, divine gift;
3. that without written language man would have no accurate record of the past;
4. that English is of Indo-European roots;
5. that the changes in the different periods of English are in vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax;
6. that language is constantly changing by creating new words and dropping old ones and that this change keeps the language alive;
7. that English is a language that has borrowed many words from other languages but the basic words are Germanic in origin;
8. that the history of the development of the dictionary reflects changes in the attitudes towards language;
9. that the dictionary is a source to determine the origins and changes in meanings of a word;
10. that language is a communicative device that may exist in many visual and/or audio forms.
III. Teaching strategies

OBJECTIVE A: Given the steps through which a person learns his language, the student will examine the process.

1. Conduct a discussion on the babbling stages and how it acquaints the child with the sounds of language by the family's response; have the students who babysit with 3 to 6 month-old children or who have or remember their siblings of this age contribute.

2. Have the students ask mothers how they can tell what a baby wants before he learns to speak and then have them report their findings to the class.

3. Promote a discussion on how the students learned to speak: whimpering and crying, babbling, imitative speech (without understanding meaning), referential speech.

4. Have students relate how younger children have learned to talk: i.e., first words, phrases spoken.

5. Have students who are learning or have learned a second language relate the process; compare this to the way the students learned to talk.

6. Have the students ask their parents what the first words spoken by the student were; have them report their findings to the class, note the similarities, and formulate a reason for these similarities.

7. Have students research and report the means of communication among bees, fish, porpoises, etc, and contrast this to man's means of communication.

8. Show a film on Helen Keller for the class to discuss how she learned to talk.

9. Have students read and discuss chapter 13 of THE STORY OF MY LIFE by Helen Keller to discover how children who cannot see or hear learn to speak.

10. Have students read Helen Keller's THE STORY OF MY LIFE and present a panel discussion on her frustrations resulting from the lack of speech and the changes in her personality as her communication skills increased.

11. Have a group of students or the drama department put on a dramatic reading or act out scenes from THE MIRACLE WORKER.

12. Have students investigate the research of partially deaf children who learn to talk normally.

Divide the class into groups to discuss the different stages of learning a language and what each stage contributes to the development of speech.
14. Tape different children at different ages or have the students tape the children (infant, toddler, 3-4 years, 6-7 years) and play the tape for the class to discuss the progress made at the different stages.

15. Tape a first grader talking freely and then a member of the class. Play the tape to the class and have them discuss the learning that has occurred in the years between. (A visual transcription of each spoken passage would help in the examination of syntax and vocabulary.)

OBJECTIVE B: Given a theory on the origin of language, the student will specify limitations of the theory.

1. Promote a discussion to show the differences between animal communication and human speech.

2. Have a student read and report on Genesis, chapter 2, verses 18-20, and chapter 11, verses 1-9. The class may explain the different ways these stories could be interpreted (literally—language as a divine gift, man attained language(s) at different stages, or figuratively—first language produced out of necessity and creative power in man caused the diversity.)


4. Have students list words that would seem to suggest the validity of each language theory.

5. Have students read and listen to advertisements for words that have been coined because of their sound.

6. Have students invent a new product and create a name using onomatopoeia, reduplication, or sound symbolism.

7. Explain how acronyms introduce new words into our language. Have students give examples. (CARE)

8. Have a group of students research the development of the written communication and present a panel discussion to the class.

9. Show THE ALPHABET CONSPIRACY and conduct a discussion on the advantages the English alphabet has over pictograms, logograms, ideograms, and phonograms for written communication.

10. Have a student research the history of the Rosetta Stone and report to the class.

11. Have a group of students research and report on the origin of our alphabet. (They could make transparencies or posters to illustrate the presentation.)

12. Have a student read and report on Ludovici's ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE.
13. Have the students take a survey of five other people concerning what they think is the origin of language. Have them report the results to the class and discuss.

14. Have individual students research and report on the contributions to written language made by the following: Runes, Alfred the Great, Johann Gutenberg, William Caxton, data processing.

15. Have students give reports on the various theories on the origin of language.

16. Have class read material prior to class discussion on the origins of speech. (See bibliography for suggested works.)

17. Have students coin words to fit the hypotheses of language origins.

18. Show soundstrip LANGUAGE to discuss origins of language, its function in human interaction, the roles of sound and formalized grammar, and the historical development of English.

19. Explain how man still makes new words because of sound; i.e., onomatopoeia, (meow), reduplication (fuddy-duddy, teeny-weeny), sound symbolism (clatter, click or snore, snort). Then have students examine a list of words to determine which words are examples of which process.

20. Show the videotape on the ROLE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A RECORDER OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE for the class to discuss the importance of language to man.

21. Have the class make a list of the 25 ugliest and the 25 most beautiful words in the language and analyze why they chose those particular words.

22. Make a transparency of an imaginary creature for the class to name; discuss why they named it as they did.

23. Divide the class into groups which will try to create their own theory on the origin of language.

24. Have these groups report to the class; then have the students write a composition on one of the new theories and why it seems the most feasible of the ones presented as well as specifying the limitation of the new theory.

25. Divide the class into groups: one group develops an incident to be told in pictograms; one group develops a set of logograms and writes a message to be transmitted; one group develops an ideogram chart and writes a message to be transmitted; one group develops a set of phonograms and writes a message to be transmitted; one group develops a cipher or code of signs and writes a message to be transmitted. Have each group explain his method of written communication and present the sample message written by this method with the word translation underneath (transparencies would be most useful for the illustrations, otherwise dittoes could be given to each class member.)
OBJECTIVE C: Given examples of patterns of change in the English language, the student will formulate a hypothesis for the causes.

1. Promote a discussion on the importance of language: recording of past, explaining the future, anticipating the future; necessary for verbal thinking, means for vicarious experiences.

2. Promote a discussion on the questions: What difficulties would we find if our language changed without restraint? What difficulties would we find if language never changed?

3. Have a student make a transparency of a simple time line that shows the historical events that affected language changes.

4. Show videotape on the CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE for the class to discuss the historical changes in language.

5. Refer students to chapter 30 in NEW DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH to read and work exercises on language changes.

6. Refer students to chapter 31 in NEW DIMENSIONS IN ENGLISH, pages 338-345, to discover the influences on American English and the influence of American English on other languages.

7. Refer the students to the essay "Something About English" by Paul Roberts in LANGUAGE AND SYSTEMS, p. 35. Have them read the essay; then divide the class into small groups to work exercise 1, pp. 52-53.

8. Have a group of students read and present a round table discussion on Sparke's THE STORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

9. Have two students compare a factual account of the influence of the Norman Invasion on English and Sir Walter Scott's account in chapter one of IVANHOE. Have them present their findings to the class and lead a discussion on why the accounts would have variations.

10. Have the students examine current newspapers and magazines and list current words recently borrowed from a foreign language.

11. Have those students who are bilingual or are studying another language report on the similarities and differences in language structure of English and the other language.

12. Have a German teacher come in and present a short talk on the similarities between German and English verbs; e.g., two tense forms with other changes made by adding an auxiliary, formation of two tense forms, etc. (This could be taped if the teacher cannot come in the period required.)

13. Make a transparency of the divisions of the Germanic language to show that English is derived from a Germanic dialect.

14. Project a transparency of the three periods in the development of English with the major historical events. Conduct a
discussion on how and why these historical events would affect the development of the language. (Old English 449-1100, Middle English 1100-1500, Modern English 1500-present)

15. Project a transparency of a passage written in Old English. Have the students pick out words they can recognize; then project an overlay of a literal translation to discuss the differences in the way it read then and the way we would write it today.

16. Give the students copies of the "Prologue to the CANTERBURY TALES" in Middle English and play a recording of it while they follow along. Have them discuss the changes in pronunciation that have occurred.

17. Give the students a short passage in Middle English from the Canterbury Tales for them to try to translate.

18. Have a student research and report on the dialects of Old English and the dialect from which our modern language is derived.

19. Have a student research and report on the dialects of Middle English.

20. Have the students write a paper that tells how the vocabulary of a language changes, the influences on word meanings, and why some words are added and others dropped.

21. Make a transparency of old-fashioned words and slang expressions for the class to discuss. Then have students make their own list.

22. Have students bring in words or expressions used by parents and grandparents in reference to clothing, dances, automobiles, medicine, aviation, fads, etc. for comparison to words used today. EXAMPLES: knickers, Big Apple, middy-blouse, cranking the car, etc.

23. Have the students name 20 words that they think may be archaic or obsolete in 50 years. Write these words on an acetate or the chalkboard; then have the students select 3 to 5 of these words and write a composition telling why they think these words will be archaic or obsolete.

24. Select several words that have become obsolete from a Shakespearean play, a Baconian essay, Chaucer's CANTERBURY TALES, Milton's writings, Bradford's JOURNAL or Edwards' sermons. Divide the class into small groups and have the groups discuss why these words have become obsolete. (Dictionaries should be available for the students to look up the words.)

25. Conduct a discussion on why English has borrowed some of the words it has.

26. Have small groups research and report on how and when Latin words came into English; Scandinavian words came into English; French words came into English; Greek and Latin words came into English.

27. Give the students a short prose passage (about 100 words) by an English speaking author for them to look up the origin of each word and to make
a chart of the percentage of words from Anglo-Saxon, French, Scandinavian, Latin, Greek, and other origins.

28. Have a group of students make a map (transparencies, posters) designating the language spoken in various parts of the world to determine geographical barriers to the spreading of language.

29. Present words with interesting backgrounds for the students to figure out from the dictionary information how the words have come to mean what they do. EXAMPLES: chocolate, bedlam, derrick, choreography.

30. Play the record THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE and promote a discussion on some of the differences in pronunciation found in our language.

31. Have students investigate the following: story of the Indo-European language; history of place names; history of people's first names; history of surnames; history of the names of days of the week and the months; influence of recent historical events on language.

32. Have a student research neolithic and report on it to the rest of the class so that all can gain more information about the Indo-European culture and its effect on language.

33. Give examples of Indo-European roots (THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE has this in the appendix) with the English meaning and examples of words that have developed from this root. Lead a discussion on the similarities in meanings and then have the students write a paper on what may have caused the changes. EXAMPLE: mappa (napkin, towel, cloth) -- apron, map, mop, napery, napkin.

34. Have the students write a paper that explains why English has borrowed words.

35. Have the students write a composition discussing the effects of the printing press on our language.

36. Project a transparency of a passage written in Old English with a literal translation underneath. Have the students make generalizations about the characteristics of Old English. EXAMPLE: Old English doesn't have many borrowed words; Old English uses inflectional endings; word order is not fixed.

37. Project a transparency of a passage written in Middle English with a literal translation underneath. Have the students make generalizations about the characteristics of Middle English. EXAMPLE: French words are present; inflectional endings have been simplified; subject-verb-complement pattern more fixed.

OBJECTIVE D: Given a list of words, the student will investigate the origin and changes in meaning.

1. Make a transparency of a group of words for the students to look up the origins in the dictionary.
2. Have the students list their favorite foods or the foods that they ate the day before and look up the origin of each name.

3. Give the students a list of borrowed words that suggest the language of origin for them to guess the origin and then check their guess in the dictionary. EXAMPLES: fez, curry, banjo, kimono.

4. Give the students a list of words to guess the origin and then check their guess in the dictionary. EXAMPLE: knife, chocolate, wigwam, pretzel, sherbet. Have them tell why they guessed what they did.

5. Have students list terms that have come into existence or taken on a new meaning because of new inventions.

6. Have students select a short passage from the Bible, the Koran, the Book of Mormon or similar religious books and look up the origin of each word to make a graph that shows the percentage of native and borrowed words.

7. Have the students write a short paragraph on a topic of their choice and then look up the origin of the first 50 words to determine the origins of their own vocabulary.

8. Have students read the story of words that are related to events. EXAMPLES: boycott, sandwich, tawdry, bedlam, chauvinistic.

9. Give the students a list of words that have an archaic meaning different from the modern meaning and have them investigate its history. EXAMPLE: guy, gig.

10. Give the students a list of words that name a fashion or a custom in the past and have them look up the origin and describe the item. EXAMPLE: tabard, gauntlet, peruke.

11. Give the students a list of common nouns derived from proper names and have them look up and explain their derivation and meaning. EXAMPLES: quixotic, sideburns, tantalize.

12. Define homographs for students and then give them several homographs to look up the etymology and to write a sentence for each separate homograph. EXAMPLES: mean, peer, pawn, tender, squash.

13. Give the students a short quotation from Shakespeare. Have them discuss what they find old fashioned in the quotations and then rewrite the quotations as each would be written today.

14. Divide the class into small groups and give them different lists of words to look up in two or more dictionaries; have them discuss the differences in the entries and what might cause these differences. (WEBSTER'S SECOND NEW INTERNATIONAL, unabridged; WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL, unabridged; THE SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, and THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE would be good dictionaries to have available.)
15. Have several copies of English-French, English-Spanish, English-German, and English-Italian dictionaries available and have the students look up the foreign language equivalent of several words (blood, wine, gas, nine, water). Then have them find similarities and differences between the English word and the foreign language equivalent. (Foreign language teachers could be a resource for other words.)

16. Have a group of students research and present a panel discussion on the history of the dictionary: Robert Cawdrey, Edward Phillips, Samuel Johnson, Noah Webster, Oxford English Dictionary. They should include how each one determined a word's inclusion, the type of information given about each entry, and the contribution to lexicography each made.

17. Give the students a group of words that originally had specialized meanings but today have generalized definitions and have them look up the original meanings and try to trace their development to the modern more general definitions. EXAMPLE: wit—'good sense'—'sane'—'ability to perceive humor'—'one skilled in repartee' (The OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY is the best source, but a college or unabridged dictionary will serve.)

OBJECTIVE E: Given the study of The Nature of Language, the student will construct a new method of communication.

1. Have students keep a log of one day's experiences indicating which experiences involved language.

2. Have the students write a composition describing the way they communicate with their pets.

3. Have the students demonstrate a code to the class (semaphore, sign language of the deaf, etc.)

4. Have students demonstrate signals used in sports.

5. Have the students write a definition of language; read their definitions to the class, and discuss.

6. Have the students read Sandburg's poem "Languages" (can be found in THE LANGUAGES OF DISCOVERY, p. 92 of the NEW ENGLISH SERIES) and discuss what Sandburg has to say about language.

7. Show the film CONCRETE POETRY to discuss how concrete poetry uses words for communication.

8. Project a picture of a group of people or animals. Tell the student these are inhabitants from another galaxy. Have the students construct a method of communicating with these creatures.

9. Divide the class into several groups. Have each group create a new type of creature and describe how this creature will communicate. Have each group make a transparency of his creature and report to the class how it will communicate with others of its own kind and with those not of its kind.
10. Give the students a series of sentences using only 10 to 15 words. Have the students create a new language, including the inflections needed to say each sentence. EXAMPLE: 1. John buys records in the morning. 2. John's records were bought in the morning. 3. John recorded his buy in the morning. 4. John will record his buy in the morning. 5. The morning is the time for John to buy his record.

F. Optional learning activities

1. The class keeps a current bulletin board and/or class scrap book of new words or phrases that seem to be currently entering the language; of cartoons, illustrations, or articles that are related to language beginnings and learning processes; of words that have been used so that a new meaning is added.

2. An individual student or a group makes a movie or slide-tape presentation illustrating the beginnings of language, a child's learning to talk, or the history of English.

3. Small groups of students discuss the limitations of each theory on the origin of language, citing examples of words that cannot be accounted for by any theory.

4. Individual students research the types of words that came into English as a result of the Norman invasion, words that were once slang but are now acceptable words (e.g., mob, nervous), and words that have recently entered our language as a result of technological inventions.

5. The students read poems by Ogden Nash to discover how he coins new words.

6. The class writes its own dictionary of their current slang.
VII. Student Resources

A. State adopted textbooks


B. Non-state adopted resources


C. Media Resources


Alphabet Conspiracy, Parts 1 and 2. Southern Bell Telephone, 30 min. color. Dade County number 1-30140, 1-30141 (film).


The Changing English Language. Educational Record Sales, 1 12" 33 1/3 rpm.

The Changing English Language, Vol. II. Educational Record Sales, 1 12" 33 1/3 rpm.

Communication—from Stone Age to Space Age. Universal Education and Visual Arts. 6 color filmstrips.

Concrete Poetry. Pyramid Films. 12 min. Color. $12.00 (film).


Language and Nationalism. Dade County number 1-31855 (film).

"Language Tree." E 11-1665. Dade County Department of Educational Media. 1 Transparency.

The Linguists. Dade County number 1-31856 (film).

Linguistic Backgrounds of English, Groups 1 and 2. Society for Visual Education. 12 color filmstrips, 6 records or cassettes, and guides.

McQueen, Alexander. Drama in Everyday Words. A/V Center, 600 ft. 10 min. tape recording. Dade County number 3-00114.

"Middle English from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales." E 11-13 Dade County Department of Educational Media. 1 transparency.

Not By Words Alone. Dade County number 1-31852 (film).
Odds and Ends. Creative Film Society, 6 min. Color. $7.00 (film).

One World, Many Tongues. Dade County Number 1-31851 (film).

"Old English Introduction to Alfred the Great’s Pastoral Care." E 11-1 and 262 Dade County Department of Educational Media. 2 transparencies.

"Old English Noun." E 11-7. Dade County Department of Educational Media. 1 transparency.


Pitch, Stress and Juncture. Society for Visual Education. 1 color filmstrip, 1 record or cassette, and guide.


Sounds of the Language. Scott, Foresman. Record.

"Story of Communication." E 11 15A and 865 Dade County Department of Educational Media, 2 Transparencies.

The Strange Case of the English Language, Parts 1 and 2. Bailey-Film Associates. 48 min. Color (film) Dade County number 1-31876, 1-31877.


A Thousand Years of English Pronunciation. Educational Record Sales. 2 12" 33 1/3 rpm.

Times and People Change Words. Society for Visual Education. 1 color filmstrip.

Watch Your Language. Dade County number 1-31854 (film).

Word Order. Society for Visual Education. 1 color filmstrip, 1 record or cassette, and guide.

Words Then and Now. Society for Visual Education. 1 color filmstrip.

VIII. Teacher Resources

A. Textbooks


Allen, Harold B.; Newsome, Verna L.; Wetmore, Thomas H.;


Professional Books and Periodicals


Melchior, Thomas E. "A Language Unit in the Junior High." English Journal. 56.


