6 "If I Saw the President, He'd Probably Call My Mom": The Many Uses of Language in the Speech Therapy Class

I am not comfortable here. As a teacher of writing, I have seen in student after student the success of my patience in allowing fluency and technical competence to grow with no need for my hyper-attentiveness to matters of correctness. As one who talks with teachers at all levels, I feel time and time again their joy as they relate the results of trusting to the "process," as it has been described by Emig, Britton, and others. In the language-rich classes I have studied, from first grade through college, I have seen children and adults writing and conversing easily and happily, excited about their learning and proud of themselves and each other.

The younger children and most of the older ones, too, are by no means polished writers. All are learning, growing gradually day by day, often imperceptibly, often dramatically. Their speaking, too, improves step by almost unnoticeable step. I know this and I trust in it; consequently, I do not, and would not, interrupt my attention to my five-year-old son Christopher's excited explanation of the workings of a gasoline engine to ponder his frequent replacement of *th* by *d* or *s*. I fear that I would violate his sense of order and do some small but definite damage to his integrity were I to call attention to the sound rather than the sense of what he says. I might even make him afraid to speak. Hence, I try not to worry about imperfections that, I trust, will pass with time and talk.

That is why I am uncomfortable here, in this, a speech therapy class. I voice my concern to Cynthia Dietz, the speech resource teacher at Orange Hunt Elementary School, who will work today with some ten small groups of children ranging in age from six to twelve; their identified speech problems include speech anxiety, stuttering, and unsatisfactory pronunciation of various sounds. From her words, it is clear that Dietz has carefully considered this issue many times before; indeed, she confronts it every time she must decide whether a particular child, whom the child's teacher has brought to her attention, really needs the two to three special periods per week in the therapy class.

"We know," she says, "that many children in kindergarten and first grade still can't pronounce some common sounds. One of my priorities is to help the classroom teacher recognize the difference between normal development and the problem—relatively rare—that needs attention." Almost as important as the speech therapy program, Dietz says, is the assurance she can give the primary teacher that he or she need not concern himself or herself, nor the children, with most pronunciation difficulties.

Dietz goes on to say, however, that on occasion a teacher will not perceive a more serious speech problem because the teacher is doing what he or she is supposed to do; namely, the teacher is paying close attention to *what* a child is saying rather than how it sounds. In these cases, Dietz's diagnostic expertise is especially valuable. One way by which she determines whether or not to recommend a student to the program is to observe how his or her difficulty affects the student's social relations and classroom performance. If the effect is insignificant, then she won't risk perhaps creating an identity problem for the child by adding the stigma of placement in the program. She will recommend speech therapy when the difficulty seems clearly to be inhibiting communication, learning, and the building of friendships.

The problems of diagnosis are relatively straightforward when a child of seven or older seems to have continuing difficulty pronouncing certain common sounds, with the difficulty great enough to limit the teacher's ability to understand the child. The child will simply be enrolled in Dietz's speech therapy center for as long as deemed necessary and helpful. Limiting diagnosis to a "speech" problem becomes more difficult when the symptom is stuttering or extreme reticence. In many cases, the symptom is stress-related, and a major function of the therapy is to help both teacher and student determine the conditions that are most likely to produce the speech difficulty, as well as the means that may help relieve the anxiety causing it. Thus, what goes on in the program varies markedly with the problems of the children. The children in each group tend to have similar problems and to be fairly close in age.

Though Dietz attends closely to the children's pronunciation or to other formal problems, my discomfort over this focus on correctness dissolves as I watch how she works. All the sessions in her class involve much talk between teacher and student and among the students themselves. What this class shares with the others I have observed for this study is respect for the power of language, if used in all its modes and for many tasks, to create a humane environment that prizes people and their working together. The curriculum here is narrower than in the elementary classrooms of the other teachers, and so is the scope of time (thirty minutes per group per day), yet Dietz's center seems no less language intensive.

With those groups of children having difficulty pronouncing certain sounds, much of the work aims directly at the problems and consists primarily of exercises in pronunciation. For example, Dietz will ask the children to read words off cards, to name pictured objects, or to read riddles or silly stories. There will always be a creative element to such exercises; e.g., the children will have to think up a sentence for the single words they read or the objects they name. This not only makes the exercises more interesting; it also gives Dietz a chance to listen for pronunciation in context.

Sometimes she kindles small competitions within groups, as when she reads a word and then asks the children to think of opposite terms. Since the different connotations of a word may make for several viable "opposites," such games invariably lead to further discussion.

Another dimension of the language interaction gives the children responsibility for teaching one another. Although the groups Dietz teaches are small—no more than six in a period—she gives pairs of students separate tasks in order to vary the types of interaction and the learning challenges. For example, one member of a pair will read aloud (in a moderate tone) to the other, who has been instructed to count his or her partner's correct productions of key sounds. Dietz does not intend to get an accurate evaluation from this exercise; like the self-evaluation of the daily research in Carin Hauser's class, this assignment gives the students another conscious perspective on their work. To evaluate their partners, the students have to *listen* to the sounds spoken and *compare* the heard pronunciation to their own ideas of what is correct. Hence, the listeners themselves "practice" the sounds, even if not vocally.

In the past two years, since participating in the Northern Virginia Writing Project summer institute, writing, too, has become an essential part of Dietz's speech curriculum. With the children having difficulty with certain sounds, this addition means, for example, a homework assignment in which each child writes the physical directions for going from the speech therapy center to another place in the school. The children read their directions aloud to the group during the next session and ask the others to guess the place to which they have traveled. Dietz asks the children to practice their readings at home beforehand, "using your best sounds." Again, she is using the game potential of the small group to focus both speaker and listener closely on the words, since each word will be important toward guessing the secret place. Dietz also knows that the act of composition, plus the expectation of performance, will keep the children more attuned to words than any prewritten exercise can. Besides, the directions game is more fun.

The speech therapy center is a small room containing a table surrounded by six chairs; this forms the setting for informal, yet purposeful, discussion. When children who stutter or who are otherwise inhibited speakers enter the center, both the *how* and the *why* of language change for Cynthia Dietz. Language activities for these children are intended to put them at ease, so that they can confront directly the fact of their difficulty and consider how they might overcome it. It should not surprise the visitor that the children do not keep silent and that they stutter less frequently in the center. As both Dietz and the children themselves will tell you, they stutter most severely when they are frightened, as in the presence of an adult whose acceptance of them is uncertain. As one eight-year-old boy told me, "I only stutter when I see a supreme commander. If I saw the president, he'd probably call my mom." The children know that Dietz will not criticize their speech—nor what they say—and so they talk freely.

Writing plays an important part in this liberating process. Like Elly Uehling, Dietz has been experimenting this year with regular, in-class journal writing, which the students read to others in their group. What the students write about varies from day to day. Before they write, Dietz and the children spend a minute or two saying what they might write about and getting the tacit approval of the others. One child's idea might become the common theme for everyone's writing. At other times, Dietz will suggest that the children write something about their talking or about how they feel when they must talk in certain situations. For the younger children (some are as young as six), these sessions will sometimes produce no more than a brief sentence in the five to ten minutes allotted for writing. Volume is not important to Dietz. What is important is that the children come to see writing as another friendly method of expression, indeed a way of expressing themselves when the spoken word becomes difficult. Relying on the inherent power of written composing to generate ideas for the writer, she also sees this language mode as potentially helping her students feel prepared for perhaps frightening occasions on which they may be called on to speak. To ensure that the writing itself will not become a source of fear for the children, she makes every effort to show acceptance of what they write. When, for example, a six-year-old girl says that she doesn't know how to spell a certain word, Dietz asks her how she spelled it and praises her for the correctly phonetic, though technically incorrect, spelling she gives. When one of the other children gives her the correct spelling, both children have reason to feel good about their contributions.

With something tangible—their journal entries—to share with the others, every child can feel proud of his or her contribution to the discussion. Since the entries are brief, all students have the opportunity to contribute within the short period. Dietz's comments on these writings are frequently questions that probe the connection between the writing and the expressed focus of the group, i.e., the speech difficulty. When one boy reads, for instance, "If I killed a dog, I'd be scared to tell the owner," Dietz refrains from commenting on the obvious violence; instead, she seeks the reason for the child's fear: "Why do you think you'd be scared? Is it because you'd killed the dog, or because you'd be afraid of stuttering?" While the boy considers his answer, another child says—and stutters as he does so, for the only time in the period—"It's hard to talk to someone when you know they're mad at you." The first boy nods in agreement. The writing has given the writer the chance, and the tool, to express a feeling that he might have had a hard time saying aloud. It has given the other boy an insight, plus the courage to speak his own fear, even though it is clearly difficult for him to do so. From the exchange, Dietz learns something about both boys, knowledge that she can build on in later sessions.

Needless to say, reacting and responding to entries such as this requires a good deal of forbearance. The children trust Dietz with words and feelings that they may not feel comfortable sharing with anyone else, including—sometimes especially—their parents. Because Dietz is a speech specialist, she works to restrict her observations and conclusions to those with direct bearing on the problems she is addressing, even though those problems may have psychological causes that are outside the limits of her expertise. Hers is not a comfortable position. It would be perhaps easier for her to conduct more predictable, less interactive sessions for these students, giving them few or no opportunities to express themselves; however, without the writing and the open discussion, she could not become aware of the differences among her students, differences crucial to her treatment of their stuttering or their fear of speaking. Moreover, by making the center a language-rich environment, she gives the children an opportunity to succeed in speech, to make writing a friend rather than an enemy, and to begin to overcome their reticence by talking about events and feelings that had formerly daunted them. Yes, it is disconcerting and even frightening to have one's speech problems—the tangible signs of one's fear—probed by a teacher and by one's fellow classmates. But when the scrutiny takes place in a classroom like that of Cynthia Dietz, where language is always a way to freedom and good feeling, not to further shame, then fear gives way to comfort. For some of the children, the speech program may be their first comfortable place, and if it is the first, it may be the first of many.

Cynthia Dietz Comments on Her Teaching: "It's Square and Has Lots of Paper in It"

"To . . . To . . . Tony is absent and Joey is ta . . . ta . . . taking a test today, Mrs. Dietz," announced Steven as he stood in the door of the small speech room.

"I guess it's you and I then, Steven. That will be a nice change—just the two of us."

"What do . . . do . . . do you want to do?" he asked, moving the few feet to a stand beside my desk, where I was seated.

"Hmmmm . . . ," I thought aloud. "Good question. What shall we do?"

"We . . . We . . . We could write in our journals. Mine's in my speech fo . . . folder," suggested the lanky eight year old, his straight brown hair falling into his eyes.

"Great idea! Mine's right here."

We each found a blue primary chair and gathered around the child-sized table in the center of the room. Ignoring the bookshelf, mirror, and mobile, we nestled comfortably amidst the surrounding walls of word lists and brightly colored action posters.

"What shall we write about today?" I asked.

"Well, we . . . we . . . we could write . . . write about our ne . . . nervous habits. You know, the stuff we just do, like blink your eyes. Stuff . . . Stuff like that."

"Good idea, Steven. I have one and I need to write about it. Let's think about what we do and why we do it."

We wrote steadily and quietly for about ten minutes.

"That felt good, Steven. Can I share first today? Would that be all right?"

"Sure, go ahead," he replied, blinking his eyes with deliberate movements as he spoke.

I read aloud my entry about biting my fingernails and rubbing my fingers together. I told Steven when and why I do these things, how doing them never makes me feel any better, and how hard it is for me to stop.

"Hey, you do that, too? So do I! The thing with your fingers, I mean. I do it sometimes, too," Steven blurted out with obvious surprise. "Can I read mine now?"

"Yes. Please do. I'd like to hear it."

Steven read what he had written:

> 3-15-85
>
> One of my neverse habtais is in my anlke I move a bone up and down I don't know why I do it another habit is taping my fingrs I think I do that because I haave waited for a long time like a friend coming from Newyork another habit is shaking my head I do not know why I do that.

I was particularly interested in Steven's head shaking and finger tapping. I had noticed these habits earlier and was concerned that they were becoming secondary characteristics of his stuttering. If these activities were related, if they were a part of his stuttering pattern, then his therapy would need to address the issue and deal with their elimination.

From the ensuing discussion, I learned that Steven made no connection between the gestures and his speech. Although he tapped his fingers only when he was impatient and admitted to shaking his head "almost all the time," he was not consciously using either activity to aid his talking.

As Steven left my room and headed back to his class, I felt pleased that he had willingly written—and talked—about his nervous habits, and I was relieved that he did not relate them to his talking. I was not overly concerned that he did not complete any articulation drill, nor was I worried that he did not practice fluency exercises. There would be other classes for that.

I valued the session because our writing and talking made Steven aware of himself and his idiosyncrasies. He learned that his habits, like his stuttering, were things that he did rather than things that happened to him; things that he controlled rather than things that controlled his being.

Children who stutter often are confused about their speech patterns. They cling to erroneous beliefs about why they have trouble talking and make mistaken assumptions about what helps them to talk better. Vague and misleading, these beliefs can interfere with the child's progression toward fluency.

Most young stutterers view their blocks as events that happen to them rather than as behaviors they exhibit. Accepting the responsibility for the way one speaks is often an important—and sometimes difficult—step in therapy. After accepting their speech as a behavior that they exhibit, these children acknowledge it as something they can change.

One Monday morning, I gave Steven, Tony, and Joey a report portfolio filled with twenty-five pages of third-grade tablet paper. My introduction and instructions were concise:

> These are your journals. We will write in them at the beginning of class every Monday and Friday. You may write any other time you wish. Most of the time each of you may write about whatever you want. Sometimes we will suggest ideas for all of us to write about. We will write for five to ten minutes, and then share our writing.

Steven and his classmates exhibited speech disorders of both articulation and fluency, and at times evidenced accompanying emotional difficulties. These boys were reluctant to talk about their speech, but I hoped they would be willing to write about it. Through directed freewritings I wanted them to explore their talking and their thoughts about it. I believed that writing and sharing the journals would give expression to feelings and concerns about talking.

I accepted anything from the boys and respected everything they wrote and shared. Most of the time I would verbally acknowledge their efforts and thank them for sharing their thoughts. Occasionally I would make a written comment in the journal to verify a perception or to ask for additional information.

Our discussions after sharing the written entries often became directly related to their speech, even if their entry topics were not. We heard about hard-fought soccer games, exciting trips to the zoo, fun-filled bar mitzvahs, and overt sibling rivalries. We learned about being a young stutterer and what it felt like to try to talk to different people in various situations.

The journals were accepted by two of the boys from the start. On the first day, seven-year-old Joey wrote:

> I like my journal. It is neat. I can write in it. There is lots of paper.

Steven's first entry read:

> I am very, happy about keeping a journal it is fun keeping a journal I have never had a journal before it is square and has lots of paper in it it is neat to have a journal.

Tony was more reluctant to write than the others, and often failed to bring his speech folder or his journal to class. When given paper and asked to write with us, Tony found pencils to sharpen, books to read, and pictures to examine. As the weeks went by and we shared our writings regularly, Tony gradually became more willing to write. Although he readily participated in the discussions following a journal reading, Tony remained the most reluctant to read his own entries.

Our journal writing was not always easy, and not always fun. One day I said, "Today let's write anything about our talking," thinking that the openness of my request would make it less threatening and more acceptable to the boys. My suggestion was met with moans and complaints.

"I don't like to do that," said Steven.

"Me neither," added Joey.

"Do we have to?" pleaded Tony.

"Well, I guess not," I said, adjusting my request to their reactions. "But I really am interested in why you don't like to write about it. Can we write about that?"

The boys willingly wrote their reasons. Joey indicated:

> I don't like to write about my talking because it is very very very inbaresting.

Tony, rather than reading his entry aloud, commented, "I don't want to read mine be . . . be . . . because I'm too embarrassed." Steven's entry echoed Tony's words:

> I don't like to write about my talking because I get enbaressted when I read it because they might laugh.

The boys shared their shame and fear, and when no one laughed, they learned that these feelings could be aired and addressed.

At times, I suggested topics for directed freewritings or asked for suggestions from the boys. They examined their best and worst talking, relating the varying situation, subject, and audience. They described their stuttering in terms of what they did, what they heard, and what they felt. They explained what they liked best about their speech and what they most wanted to change. They wrote about speech class activities and what they learned from these activities. They discovered how they felt about themselves and the way they talked, and the impact these feelings had on their speech. I wrote as the boys did, and shared my writings and my feelings with them.

I didn't know what to expect when I began journal writing with these three students, but I have been pleased with the results. I am not alone in my respect for this activity. When asked to comment on the use of journals in speech class, the most reluctant writer willingly read his entry:

> I think it's good to share our thoughts because it's fun, we found out what each other had to say, sometimes I felt happy, sad, funny, or just the same.

Writing has offered the boys an appropriate outlet for their feelings, and sharing their writings has helped them deal with their fear, shame, and anxiety about their talking. Our discussions worked to clarify the myths about stuttering and encouraged the beliefs that result in normal speech. Using the journal as a basis for discussion has enabled these students to reconsider, if not to change, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that affect the way they talk.