

Original Paper

Perceiving the Materiality of Language in Teaching English

Language Arts

E.A. Gamini Fonseka, PhD^{1*}

¹ Department of English & Linguistics, University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka

* E.A. Gamini Fonseka, PhD, Senior Professor in English, Department of English & Linguistics, University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

As language is the medium of an art or a configuration of arts focused on communication, it is indispensable to realize the materiality of language with its potential to interpret the numerous phenomena in the environment. Our individual microcosms filled with messages on various complex situations received through our sensory channels exist in terms of strings of verbal language that help to re-create them for communication in whatever fashion we want. We experience language in meaningful utterances that function in singles or clusters to represent the life world in numerous registers. Our expressions inspired by our experiences of the life world are communicated through words orchestrated in grammatically patterned sentences. Like in other forms of art, in English language arts, teachers and learners can behave with confidence, when they realize the substance they deal with as oral sounds that gradually evolve into syllables, morphemes, signs, symbols, metaphors, and images, which creatively represent the life world. Against this background, I intend to demonstrate here the relevance of perceiving the materiality of language under the framework of a multifaceted unity of several disciplines, namely, phonology, morphology, semiotics, rhetoric, and stylistics that altogether contribute to a holistic approach to language. A concrete perception of language achieved in this manner helps to recover the learning process not only from inhibition and anxiety but also from fossilization and ephemerality.

Keywords

material-device continuum in communication, English Language Arts, vocal sounds, realia, metaphor, imagery, meaning, conceptualizing

1. Introduction

This paper strives to demonstrate a way of introducing language as a kind of material that inspires a variety of devices to create meaning in a variety of contexts and to draw attention to the need of dealing with it as the substance used in the medium of an art.

2. Objectives, Research Problem, and Significance

The objective of this paper is to raise in the readers an awareness of the material-device continuum in communication where the material is language and the devices are the strategies in which language is used to formulate ideas to suit the multitude of contexts where communication occurs, and draw their attention to the materiality of language while teaching it as the medium of an art.

As long as the teachers do not perceive the materiality of language and its inter-relationship with the life world they strive to teach it as something abstract. Most failures the Sri Lankan learners of English are faced with today are due to the shortcomings in their perception of what language is, what sort of materiality it has, and how it connects us to the life world. When the materiality of language is perceived it is easy to realize that verbal language is a medium of representing the life world that can be ranked with any other medium such as painting, sculpture, drama, music, or cinema.

Therefore it is significant to draw attention to the potential of language to re-create the life world in terms of symbols or metaphors and to enable complex conceptual systems to develop between the speakers. It is this potential that has enabled us to conceptualize most things in our communication that we do not physically experienced ourselves.

3. Methodology

As we are dealing with language as the medium of an art, first an effort is made to define what an art is, to indicate what creative and intellectual energies are exercised in mastering it, and to show how success is achieved in it as a discipline. In order to facilitate the perception of the entire scheme of language as the medium of an art, it is considered indispensable to realize the materiality of language in terms of sounds, syllables, morphs, words, phrases, and clauses. With reference to Victor Zhirmunsky's explanation to the poetics in a work of art, an attempt is made to elaborate on the material-device continuum in any piece of art and to relate it to the use and usage of language. Further the materiality of language is demonstrated through an incident where, instead of words, *realia* is used in a message and an intellectual exercise is made to interpret it with accuracy. The understanding of the materiality of language achieved here is directed to the study of semiotics, and the understanding of the devices used in language production is directed to the study of grammar, poetics and stylistics, and the material-device continuum that actualizes in connection with the life world is directed to achieving communicative competence within a framework of English Language Arts. Thus the paper makes an effort to cover some key areas important for a teacher in achieving a rudimentary knowledge of language as the medium of an art leading to the perception of the materiality of language as the medium of an art.

4. Results and Findings

While the study of language as the medium of an art or a configuration of arts involves a lifelong effort to study a variety of complex conceptual systems, language arts as a discipline also expands over a vast area of life. Therefore the effort made here cannot be considered exhaustive. Yet I am sure that this will ignite an interest in exploring language holistically, paying attention to its phonological, morphological, grammatical, semiotic, metaphorical, ethnographic, and stylistic configurations in a spirit to discover its creative and aesthetic potential in guiding the learners to treat language as a substance which can be manipulated in carrying out communicative functions effectively.

5. What is an Art?

While talking about language arts, first it is relevant to know what an art is. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines art as “the conscious use of skill and creative imagination especially in the production of aesthetic objects.” This applies to the numerous artistic activities we carry out in real life. Moreover, we as humans tend to seek for an aesthetic touch not only in objects of pleasure but also in everything we use in real life, in terms of food, medicine, clothing, housing, furniture, crockery, chinaware, cutlery, domestic appliances, garden appliances, office appliances, vehicles, machines, and many other items that are connected with our everyday paraphernalia. Also the same dictionary presents some intrinsically connected synonyms of art such as ART, SKILL, CUNNING, ARTIFICE, and CRAFT to mean “the faculty of executing well what one has devised”. Accordingly, “ART implies a personal, unanalyzable creative power... SKILL stresses technical knowledge and proficiency... CUNNING suggests ingenuity and subtlety in devising, inventing, or executing... ARTIFICE suggests technical skill especially in imitating things in nature... and CRAFT implies expertness in workmanship...” (*Merriam-Webster*) All these qualities together form a system to cultivate under a specific discipline while enabling the user or specializer of the vary discipline to become an artist in it.

6. Material-Device Combination in a Work of Art

According to the Russian linguistic philosopher in the formalist school Victor Zhirmunsky (1985, p. 264), who is opposed to the form and content division in art, the success of a work of art rests on the harmonious combination of the materials and the devices used in its creation.

“The traditional division into form and content distinguishing aesthetic and extra-aesthetic elements in art is now opposed by another division based on the essential features of a work of art as the object of aesthetic consideration: the division into material and device. But, as we shall show below, it needs development and deepening in connection with the teleological concept of style as a unity of devices.” (Zhirmunsky, 1985, p. 264)

His material-device approach with a clear teleological foundation developed in the 1950s remains fresh even today because of its flexibility and logicity. I consider it so because I feel both “form” and

“content” in a piece of art remain static while “material” and “device” behave differently. The material in a piece of art undergoes variations along with the device that obviously behaves dynamically. The device develops in the mind of the artist in consonance with the new ideas that occur to him and changes throughout the process of executing the relevant piece of art, transforming the properties of the material.

Although Zhirmunsky’s premise addresses the poetics in the performing arts such as drama, music, and song, and verbal arts such as poetry and prose fiction, it also addresses the desired qualities in plastic arts such as sculpture, painting, architecture, textile, and design technology as well as compound arts such as cuisine, cosmetics, medicine, etc. Whatever it is, the right usage of the right material while contriving the right devices to project the ideas, or vice versa, helps to achieve the goals set by the author. For example, in plastic arts, a statue, however beautifully created, may not hold any value if it is made of some base kind of material not resistant to weather, insects, etc. In the same order a piece of drama or song, though whose theme is of great cultural relevance, may not hold any value if the verbal, musical, mimetic, and choreographic substances devised in developing the idea are not efficacious. The same way rich materials devised badly do not hold any value. Therefore the harmony between materials and devices in a piece of work of any form is considered to generate a feeling of natural order and cosmic harmony. When the use and usage of language are identified in connection with an art, a skill, a cunning, an artifice, or a craft, there is no way of disregarding the materiality of language. As our focus in this paper is on language and the mastery and use of it as an art medium, the material we are basically concerned with is voice, the speech sounds we produce by means of our vocal system in some consensually agreed patterns as members of a speech community to articulate our ideas for communication.

7. Sounds as the Substance Words Are Made of

In the context of the chirographic society that we belong to, our study of the pronunciation of speech sounds begins with phonetics and phonology that provide systematic and well-founded understandings of the sound patterns. We experience language in meaningful sounds in singles or clusters known as syllables that appear in monosyllabic, or disyllabic, or polysyllabic patterns. These sounds are studied under a sub-discipline of language called phonology. As Delahunty and Garvey (2010, p. 89) show, phonetics, “a system for describing and recording the sounds of language objectively ... provides a valuable way of opening our ears to facets of language that we tend to understand by reference to their written rather than their actual spoken forms.” The IPA—International Phonetic Alphabet—symbols are not strange to anybody who uses a dictionary. Accordingly, we produce sounds which are identified under the three categories—consonants, vowels, and diphthongs.

Table 1. English Consonants

| <i>Manner of</i> | | <i>Place of Articulation</i> | | | | | |
|---------------------|------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Articulation</i> | | <i>Bilabial</i> | <i>Labio-dental</i> | <i>Dental</i> | <i>Alveolar</i> | <i>Palatal</i> | <i>Glottal</i> |
| Stops | Voiceless | p (<u>pat</u>) | | | t (<u>tack</u>) | | k (<u>cat</u>) |
| | Voiced | b (<u>bat</u>) | | | d (<u>dig</u>) | | g (<u>get</u>) |
| Fricatives | Voiceless | | f (<u>fat</u>) | θ (<u>thin</u>) | s (<u>sat</u>) | ʃ (<u>fish</u>) | h (<u>hat</u>) |
| | Voiced | | v (<u>vat</u>) | ð (<u>then</u>) | Z (<u>zap</u>) | ʒ (<u>azure</u>) | |
| Affricates | Voiceless | | | | | tʃ (<u>church</u>) | |
| | Voiced | | | | | dʒ (<u>judge</u>) | |
| Nasals | | m (<u>mat</u>) | | | n (<u>net</u>) | | ŋ (<u>ring</u>) |
| | | | | | | | |
| Liquids | | | | | l (<u>late</u>) | | |
| Glides | | w (<u>win</u>) | | | | y (<u>yet</u>) | |

From <http://people.umass.edu/neb/ArticPhonetics.html>

The consonants are classified under the manner of their articulation as stops, fricatives, affricatives, nasals, liquids, and glides. Further, the stops, fricatives, and affricatives are re-classified as voiced and voiceless on the basis of the use or non-use of voice in their production. On the basis of the places touched in their articulation they are all classified again as bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal. These sounds become audible only through their combination with vowels or diphthongs.

Table 2. English Vowels

| | Front | Centre | Back |
|--------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| High | i:(be <u>e</u> t) | | u:(bo <u>o</u> t) |
| | | | ʊ (bo <u>o</u> k) |
| | ɪ (bi <u>t</u>) | | ɔ:(bo <u>d</u> e) |
| Middle | ɜ: (bu <u>r</u> n) | ə (sofa <u>a</u>) | |
| | e (be <u>t</u>) | | ɒ (bo <u>u</u> ght) |
| | æ (ba <u>t</u>) | ʌ (bu <u>t</u>) | |
| low | | | ɑ: (pa <u>l</u> m) |

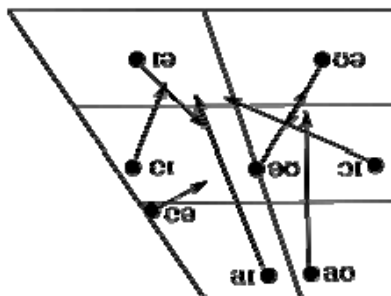


Figure 1. English Diphthongs

From <http://people.umass.edu/neb/ArticPhonetics.html>

The vowel and diphthongal sounds are made by getting the tongue to remain in certain positions, stressing against the front or the centre or the back of the palate and the lips to round or remain relaxed. For example, in the pronunciation of /i:/, the lips are relaxed and the central/front area of the tongue is in the central/high area of the mouth. In this unstressed vowel position, there is overall neutrality in the vocal system while the tongue and the lips remain relaxed. Thus, from vowel to vowel, or diphthong to diphthong, these organs function in different ways.

While phonetics describes the ways in which the individual speech sounds occur, phonology, “the study of the distribution and patterning of speech sounds in a language and of the tacit rules governing pronunciation, ... concerns itself with the ways in which languages make use of sounds to distinguish words from each other” (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 89).

As Nordqvist (2020) explains, “[t]he aim of phonology is to discover the principles that govern the way sounds are organized in languages and to explain the variations that occur”. In a special branch of phonology, the sound changes produced by the rise and fall of the voice when speaking, especially when it has an effect on the meaning of what is said, is studied under intonation (Cambridge University Dictionary). So, focus is made on word stress patterns on the basis of the number of syllables, the changes they can effect on the underlying meaning of a sentence, and their functional uses defined as tonic stress, emphatic stress, contrastive stress, and new information stress, and the treatment of certain letters in certain particular words as silent such as “k” in “knee” (Nordqvist, 2020). Thus, as we receive language by listening and reading and produce language by speaking and writing, our knowledge of phonetics and phonology both is useful in realizing the connection between the sound system and the spelling system, and perceiving and appreciating the effects of rhyme, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and other poetic devices that manipulate sound. Lines from great writers of both verse and prose who represent different eras of the English language are full of sound effects that are meant to enrich the meanings of the expressions they make with emphasis, illustrating the properties of language that help it function as an art. Thus sounds that generate meanings in a language are words.

8. Words as the Material of Language

The study of the internal structure of words form two core parts of linguistics known as phonology and morphology. While phonology deals with sound units in the creation of words, morphology deals with meaning units.

The term morphology was used originally to represent the branch of biology dealing with the form and structure of organisms. As a sub-discipline of linguistics, morphology was named for the first time in 1859 by the German linguist August Schleicher who used the term for the study of the form of words. A single morpheme or several morphemes together may go into the formation of a word. When asked “What is a word?” we answer “The smallest independent unit of language.” We call it “independent” on the basis of its behavior in language described as that it 1) does not depend on other words; 2) can be separated from other units; and 3) can change position. (AllAboutLinguistics.com)

The behaviour of words can be perceived from a simple example as follows:

Animals help humans.

Humans help animals.

Words are thus both independent since they can be separated from other words and move around in sentences, and the smallest units of language since they are the only units of language for which this is possible.

Also, under morphemes we learn about the building blocks of morphology. Accordingly, there are two categories of words such as: simple words on the basis of consisting of only one morpheme or not having internal structure, e.g., book, tree, dog, pillow, etc., and complex words on the basis of consisting two or more morphemes or having internal structure, e.g., the word “teacher” is formed of teach (root) + er (suffix) to make a noun. Thus morphemes appear as the smallest meaning-bearing units of language.

Further, we learn about the nature of the morphemes in terms of free morphemes that are words, consisting of one morpheme, e.g., man, happy, walk, at, the, etc., and bound morphemes that must be attached to another morpheme to receive meaning, e.g., a, un, er, ment, ed, etc.

The bound morphemes are also called affixes as they are attached to the stem and further they appear in two types outlined as prefixes (front of the base) = un-, dis, etc. and suffixes (end of the base) = -ness, ly, etc. We learn all these categories in terms of drawing morphology trees on words. The realization of these word units and the structures they help to make in terms of parts of speech is crucial in all language skills known as reading, writing, speaking, listening, comprehending, interpreting, and talking whose basis is having an adequate registry of formulae recorded in the mind.

9. *Realia* Substituting for Words

As we are engaged in studying a material-device approach to language it is significant to achieve a deep perception of the materiality of language. Phonology and morphology respectively demonstrate the materiality of language to some extent, emphasizing that each morph is representative of the life

world. The sounds are ephemeral and do not leave any residue once they are made. Therefore we tend to feel they do not have any physicality. Yet they hold a concrete value and the realization of it is the realization of the materiality of language. Their concretization can be experienced through their literal and metaphorical representation of the life world in terms of symbolism and imagery studied under semiotics.

A classic illustration of how the materiality of language is realized in the absence of words appears in a story from the Roman Historian Herodotus' *Histories* that involves the items in the following image:



Figure 2. My Drawing

It presents the gifts—a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows—the King of the Scythians sent to King Darius of Persia through a herald when the latter invaded Scythia. The Persians enquired of the herald that brought the gifts what they might signify. He communicated to them that the Persians might themselves discover it if only they were wise. King Darius' judgment on the gifts: Scythians were to surrender along with the terrain where the mouse lives, the water where the frog lives, the sky where the bird flies in, and the defense forces that are armed with the arrows. But his ally Gobryas interpreted the gifts after this fashion: Unless you become as birds and fly up into the air, or as mice and burrow in the earth, or as frogs and leap into the water, you shall not go back, but shall be smitten with these arrows that you die. Later Gobryas' interpretation of the gifts came true as the Scythians managed to repulse Persians from their terrain with help indirectly acquired from the Iowans by means of strategic manipulation. The gifts appeared in two contrast forms to Darius and Gobryas respectively. The ambitious Darius found them wrongly as a welcome while the crafty conspirator Gobryas found them rightly as a warning. (Adapted from Herodotus, c. 484-425 BC)

Thus the materiality of language takes different shapes depending on the quality or degree of our perception of the *realia* or symbols used. The king's perception of the message looks affected by his

ambition while Gobriya's perception of it looks free from affectation as the invasion is not as important for him as for the king. This proves that in whatever form messages are communicated the recipients perceive them in accordance with their frame of mind.

A similar incident is recorded in Sri Lanka's historical chronicle *Mahawamsa* as well.

King Kavantissa stationed Prince Tissa in Dighavapi away from Rohana to protect Dighavapi from any enemy attack. At this time Prince Gamini was under the impression that it is time to go to war with King Elara. But King Kavantissa thought otherwise. Prince Gamini asked the King three times and all three times King refused. Prince Gamini was frustrated and sent female garments to his father. This angered King Kavantissa and Prince Gamini ran away to Malaya country (hill country). After this incident, people called him "Duttha Gamini" or "Angry Gamini". Later the name was simplified to "Dutugemunu". (*Mahawamsa*)

Disappointed by his father King Kavantissa's disapproval of his campaign against the Chola domination in northern Sri Lanka, Prince Dutugemunu sent him a set of female garments, implying that they would fit his father despite his masculine identity because of the element of cowardice he sensed in the latter's negative response. The female garments were obviously meant to symbolize the effeminate behavior the son observed in his father's attitude.

What is learnt from these episodes from two ancient histories is that there have been instances when in communicating messages *realia* was used instead of verbal or written language without foregoing the desired effect.

10. Semiotic Realization of the Materiality of Language

In a semiotic approach to the materiality of language, the above stories can be studied, in light of interpretations of the characters, their behaviors, the identities they carry, the concepts they deal with, and the situations they create, based on the meanings generated by the signs and symbols that emerge from their conceptual systems. In an effort to discover the meanings out of symbolic systems and formulate interpretations based on such discoveries we are bound to maintain precision throughout our interaction with the piece of discourse in question. Moreover, it prevents us from depending too much on our intuition and compels us to center all our arguments on our semiotic perception of the imagery. "Semiotics" is defined in *Marian-Webster Dictionary* based on "semiosis", i.e., "a process in which something functions as a sign to an organism" as "a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics" (Marian-Webster, 2014). Here syntactics helps to perceive "the formal relation signs to one another", semantics, "the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable", and pragmatics, "the relation of signs to interpreters" (Levinson, 1983, p. 1). Semiotics helps to perceive the meaning and function of the imagery in concrete and prevents us from ignoring words. It is also understood that we can focus on the signs and symbols and perceive the indications, designations, significations, analogies and metaphors they are associated with while

interpreting what they mean in a logical way. Also the symbioses of signifiers and *signifieds* could be perceived as elements of a group of minor semiotic frameworks so as to enjoy the situations in terms of imagery appealing to all senses. Thus a vivid perception of a situation could help to formulate a concrete idea of it with a versatile ability to criticize, comment, explain, interpret, compare, analyze, assess, and evaluate the devices the speakers use in formulating ideas.

11. Devices in Communication Leading to Poetics

While the material used in the production of language is learnt in terms of words formed out of phonemes and morphemes, devices of expression tend to materialize in the psyche of the user on the basis of her command of the language as well as her familiarity with the concepts in question. We perceive the realities we come across through our sensory channels and interpret them using the lexical and syntactical resources available to us under a grammar we all agree upon in patterns formulated in accordance with the contexts in which we refer to them. Our behavior varies from situation to situation, depending on the feelings we harbor in the presence of such realities, and then and there the expressions we make, depending on our mastery of language as well as our familiarity with the subject we talk about, almost spontaneously engender the numerous rhetorical forms such as simile, metaphor, irony, paradox, oxymoron, etc. The poetics that emerges from our efforts to communicate our feelings thus appear in a continuum realised as a combination of material and device or materials and devices in a form of art perceived as verbal. For example, let us take “Ode to Autumn” by John Keats (1795-1821), which personifies autumn as a mature and hospitable woman with a strong command of beauty and elegance, without overlooking the natural qualities of the season.

To Autumn—John Keats

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozy hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

At the onset, Keats uses two epithets to call autumn—"season of mists and mellow fruitfulness" and "close bosom friend of maturing sun". The partnership between autumn and the sun is established through the activities autumn carries out, being a delicious and bountiful season. The sweetness, the prosperity, the cool-dry weather, and the abundance autumn represents do remain attributes of the generous feminine personality the image maintains.

Accordingly, autumn works in the company of the sun "to load with fruit the vines", "to bend with apples the mossed cottage trees", to "fill all fruit with ripeness", to "swell the gourd", to "plump the hazel shells with a sweet kernel" to set "flowers" budding "for the bees" whose "clammy cells" are "over-brimmed". The gustatory imagery implies that autumn is a generous woman ready to feed everyone with rich delicacies right from nature.

The rhetorical question "Who has not seen thee off mid thy store?" that opens the next stanza implies that the exuberant personality of autumn "sitting careless on a granary floor... on a half-reaped furrow, sound asleep, drowsed with the fumes of poppies" is accessible to all people. The spectacle of her hair "soft lifted by winnowing wind" makes her look instinctively beautiful and romantic. Her mood generates a happy intoxication with the aromas emanated by the ripe fruit, the fully bloomed flowers, and the mature grains getting seasoned in the sun. The olfactory imagery nurtured this way is further reinforced by the freshness of the "brook" and the fermented alcoholic smell spread by the

“cyder-press”. All these images catering for the sense of smell suggest autumn’s capability to intoxicate everyone with the fragrance of fruit, flowers, grains, and various types of spirits brewed from them.

Finally, after the challenging rhetorical question, “Where are the songs of spring?” Keats declares that autumn has its own songs and melodies to compete with those of the other seasons and mocks at the songs of spring, which are not heard any more. The wail of the choir of gnats, the sound of the light winds, the lambs’ loud bleat, the hedge crickets’ song, the redbreasts’ treble whistle, and the gathering swallows’ twitter, orchestrate with the beautiful colors glamorously shining in the maturing sun and the floral riches on the earth. The rosy hue that spreads all over the sky and the earth supports the effects of autumnal melodies and helps to maintain harmony in the environment. The auditory and visual imagery in the third stanza balances with the gustatory and olfactory in the other two.

The entire framework of imagery depicting numerous features of nature and contributing to a glamorous spectacle helps amuse the reader with delicacies catering for all senses or thrilling all sensory channels and make the portrayal perceivable through all sensory organs.



Figure 3. “Seated Autumn” by Giuseppe Archiboldo’s (1527-1593)

It parallels strongly with the Renaissance painter Giuseppe Archiboldo’s (1527-1593) painting “Seated Autumn”, whose subject of a mature female in a reclining position is formed of all kinds of fruits and vegetables reminding of autumnal bountifulness and stimulating all senses through a spectacular assemblage of autumnal harvest (fineart-china.com). This kind of discovery in poetics is possible when we treat language as a tangible substance that can be used with flexibility and versatility to reflect on complex scenarios that we deal with under the discipline of Language Arts.

12. To Keep Mentally Connected with the Life World through Language

Although we have access to many brilliant philosophical discoveries about the mind achieved through rigorous intellectual exercise, how the mind functions in response to the life world, how thoughts are produced in articulating our life experiences, and how we carry our conceptual systems within our individual microcosms are quests that always remain ignored in language teaching.

“Dhuurangamang eekacharang asariirang guhasayang.”

(Dhammapada, Chitta Wagga, 37)

“Faring far, wandering alone, bodiless, lying in a cave, is the mind.”

(Buddhism, Red Zambala)

Even today scientists, not to mention artistes, are they writers, poets, singers, or painters, use the Buddha’s explanation of the mind, with the identification of “the heart” as the “cave” that “the mind” occupies in the above metaphor (Wijayawardena, 2017).

With the mind, the most mysterious element in our physio-psychological makeup, we continue our connection with the life world, as explained in the doctrine of *Patichcha Samuppada* (dependent arising) in Buddhism, through a conceptual framework composed of the five aggregates—material (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), disposition (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). Every one of them arises dependent on the other, and all of them exist together as an indivisible whole throughout our existence in a world imaginarily created out of many acceptations under the illusion of “self”. “Since they are causally produced, the ideas of each aggregate are conceived individually rather than collectively” (Thakchoe, 2017). The illusion behind these aggregates lies in the fact that “[t]he collective concepts of the aggregates as a “whole” or as a “continuum” subject to cessation as they cease to appear to the mind, get excluded from the conceptual framework of the reality of the five aggregates when they are logically analysed” (Thakchoe, 2017). However, “[t]hey bring about our thoughts, feelings, ideas, evaluations and attitudes that filter and create our experience” (Ward, 2009). This type of reflection on the mind helps us become vigilant about its behavior, and control its impact on our conduct. “Mindfulness” we cultivate within a framework of this sort is helpful in maintaining our integrity before the numerous emotions we entertain during our encounters with the life world. In that sense, we need language mainly to get on with the numerous mundane concepts we deal with in our daily life as long as we exist in our assumed identities. If we learnt to identify the function of language in a utilitarian light like this, we can resolve most of the issues of language anxiety and inhibition as well.

While making progress in mastering language in terms of acquiring receptive and productive language skills of different degrees of complexity, in exposure to a multitude of language models used in a multitude of social contexts, we realize our consciousness in the presence of various situations we come across, determine our experiences, and record them for further communication. Here, as the Russian linguistic philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1939) points out “[w]e are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life.” Bakhtin’s dialogism unfolded in

this way, and the doctrine of “dependent arising” in Buddhism tally to a great extent at the point that all our thoughts arise in communication with some entity in the life world in the form of a dialogue.

It can be clarified further with reference to Bakhtin’s views about language and society, where he claims that our existence is dependent on a constant dialogue with the life world.

“To exist is to engage in dialogue, and dialogue must not come to an end. Dialogues do not occur between fixed positions or subjects. People are also transformed through dialogue, fusing with parts of the other’s discourse. The other’s response can change everything in one’s own consciousness or perspective. Dialogue can produce a decisive reply which produces actual changes. ... People constantly struggle against external definitions of their thoughts and actions, which have a deadening effect on them. There is something within each concrete person which can only be actualized through a free discursive act, and not in a pre-defined context.

For Bakhtin, dialogism characterizes the entire social world. Authentic human life is an open-ended dialogue. ... This is a world of many worlds, all equally capable of expressing themselves and conceptualizing their objects.” (Robinson, 2009)

As we are constantly in dialogue with the life world, we go by the language models that have conventionally evolved in our consciousness in determining what words to use in what contexts, in what manner, and to what effect. In this process, where we often make our decisions ethnographically, we combine our perception of life with our new experiences of the realities in the life world. Our binary pedagogical survey of language in light of a material-device continuum: 1) in terms of its material studied under phonology, morphology, semiotics, and grammar, and 2) in terms of its devices studied under ethnography, rhetoric, and poetics, although it is not complete and exhaustive, comes to a significant juncture at this point. Hence our attention is drawn to the evolution of English Language Arts as a discipline and how the perception of the materiality of language can help the teachers and learners in pursuit of it.

13. English Language Arts as a Discipline

In order to equip the children with a strong command of English with an artistic perception of it, the school subject “English Language Arts” emerged with the definition “the skills, including reading composition, speech, spelling, and dramatics, taught in elementary and secondary schools to give students a thorough proficiency in using the language” (collinsdictionary.com). Although the term “language arts” is new to Sri Lanka, as Richard Nordquist (2019) claims, it was introduced into the US in the 1950s. The developments it underwent over the decades of its existence as an academic discipline is realized in the following observation:

“First it rose to professional popularity among elementary school teachers, since it suggested the integration of skills and experiences; English, the term still used in the high school, suggested subject matter, and often, subject matter taught in isolation” (Nordquist, 2019).

The subject matter taught under language arts is represented in the following pedagogical definition of it as a school subject:

Language arts is the generic name given to the study and improvement of language skills within the school setting. Traditionally, the primary divisions in language arts are literature and language, where language in this case refers to both linguistics, and specific languages. According to the International Council of Teachers of English, the five strands of the Language arts are reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (definitions.net)

The progress the learners are supposed to achieve under a methodical English Language program can be perceived from the objectives set by the International Readers' Association and National Council for Teacher Education, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction:

- **Objective 1.** Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic, and contemporary works.
- **Objective 2.** Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
- **Objective 3.** Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word-identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
- **Objective 4.** Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- **Objective 5.** Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- **Objective 6.** Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
- **Objective 7.** Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

- **Objective 8.** Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- **Objective 9.** Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
- **Objective 10** Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
- **Objective 11.** Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- **Objective 12.** Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

The twelve objectives represent the gradual expansion of the horizons of the students concerned, taking them into new domains of literacy, starting from reading and comprehending a variety of texts for mundane purposes, through enjoying the perception of philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of human experience, applying a wide range of strategies to interpreting messages conveyed in texts with an evaluation of their textual features, using a wide range of strategies to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes, discussing and critiquing print and non-print texts stylistically, conducting academic research on issues of interest, creating and communicating knowledge through sophisticated technological and information resources, understanding diversity in language use by the others, participating in advanced intellectual and scientific conferences, and argumentatively addressing complex issues in public media. All these objectives together focus on a highly sophisticated language user.

Teachers through the years have tried to break down the big goal of “communicating ideas through language” into individual skills to work on, and most language arts programs will include a series of specific skills. My recommendation is to confer every skill a concrete value in order to make sure that it actualises in our classroom situations.

The understanding of the rationale behind every component of language arts is helpful to the teachers while developing pedagogical materials, while planning and conducting lessons, and while assessing the outcomes of the lessons taught. All skills pursued under language arts are realised under communication and the goals set for a program of learning are realised under what we call communicative competence which connects the learning outcomes achieved in the classroom to the life world as depicted in the following model.

14. Perception of the Materiality of Language in Achieving Communicative Competence under English Language Arts

Based on the language teaching theories propounded by Dell Hymes (1972), Sandra Savignon (1976), Michael Canale (1980), Merrill Swain, and Michael Canale (1983), a communicative competency model developed by Deborah Kennedy (2018), with succinct definitions of its constituents, is presented below to perceive what the learners are expected to achieve in terms of communicative competence:

- *Linguistic competence* is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence asks: What words do I use? How do I put them into phrases and sentences?
- *Sociolinguistic competence* is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence asks: Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?
- *Discourse competence* is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Discourse competence asks: How are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages, newspaper articles?
- *Strategic competence* is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about using the language in specific contexts. Strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use? What strategies can I use to manage and increase my sociolinguistic and discourse competence?

(The Essentials of Language Teaching, 2018)

The questions that follow each definition in this model are vital in understanding how communicative competence ensures success in an individual's verbal interactions with his or her interlocutors in a variety of communicative situations in the life world. The human tone in the questions that are in the first person simulate a learner's mental work during an actual communicative situation while simplifying the technical explanations further. As indicated in the discussion of the materiality of language, the "what" questions and the "how" questions in the model together demonstrate the material-device continuum, in which language occurs in communication in the medium of an art that we realize as "verbal art".

When students are groomed under an English Language Arts program in achieving a series of objectives that ensure an individual's growth from an amateur reader to a veteran academic, their perception of the materiality of language makes all materials and devices of communication appear to them as tangible elements, which can be manipulated and mobilized in any desirable fashion. In this

concern, the statement made by the 16th Century English philosopher Francis Bacon on the absorption of textual contents while reading books has a great relevance.

“Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few are to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention” (Bacon, 1625).

The activities one does in reading different types of texts at different degrees presented here in terms of tasting, swallowing, chewing, and digesting contribute to a metaphor of feeding where the materiality of language becomes prominent. It is obvious that one cannot do those activities related to feeding without any substance. That means all that is possible when we perceive the materiality of language. The more we deal with language in concrete terms our applications in pursuing and mastering it as the medium of an art or a configuration of arts will turn into concrete solutions. Therefore let's treat language as some substance that can be handled in concrete in all our teaching and learning efforts.

15. Conclusion

On the whole this paper is an effort to establish the necessity and efficacy of perceiving the materiality of language, in making pedagogical decisions concerned with the development of teaching materials, conduction of instruction, and assessment and evaluation of teaching and learning outcomes in a program of English Language Arts. In that respect it attempts to explore some universalities and fundamentals common to any form of art under the principle of material-device continuum that determines the stylistic considerations made in the execution of a piece of art. Thereby attention is drawn to the materiality of language represented in the linguistic disciplines of phonology, morphology, semiotics, grammar, and syntax, and to the devices of communication represented in those of ethnography, rhetoric, poetics, and stylistics. As the logistics of language production is predominantly confined to the mind, there is also an attempt to shed light on the mental processes involved in the development of perceptions, thoughts, and emotions in exposure to the life world. The psycholinguistic stance about the nature and behavior of language developed in this manner is introduced to the teacher's role in the development, conduction, and assessment of a program of language arts focused on communicative competence, with an assurance of success.

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