which educators examine themselves and their students in order to explore their own questions about how their classrooms are working and why. Validating such teacher research is basic to the National Writing Project. The emphasis placed on it by the Gateway Writing Project, as documented in WritingLands, reflects this commitment, illustrating how teachers can help themselves and each other examine what technology does both for them and to them. The process creates reflective teachers who can better establish a "hi-tech/hi-touch" ratio (Naisbitt, 1982) that retains the human factors that Zeni has valued from the very beginning.

Does technology matter? Do word processors improve writing skills? Will more widespread use of computers only amount to finding better ways to burn witches — using technology to do an even better job of doing terrible things to kids? There is much we already know that can help us address these issues. Our conclusions will depend on our willingness to refine and extend our questions, to broaden our perspectives on where answers can be found, and to constantly reassess the standards we apply for determining what makes some answers better than others (Marcus, 1990; 1987). WritingLands provides one of the most substantive and readable accounts available of the successful efforts of a group of committed teachers as they reached their own tentative but well-informed conclusions. They are people addressing three very basic questions: What? So what? Now what? Zeni has documented how students and teachers are most empowered, their work most enriched, and their achievements most ensured, when each domain — research, teaching, and technology — informs the others and contributes to the overall quality of their efforts.

References


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DECLINING GRAMMAR AND OTHER ESSAYS ON THE ENGLISH VOCABULARY
Dennis Baron
National Council of Teachers of English, 1989

If I had to spend a year on a desert isle I would bring with me the compact edition of The Oxford English Dictionary and the spy glass that accompanies the volumes. When I wearied of reading, I would start fires. I don't know how Professor Baron feels about starting fires with spy glasses, but I believe he is the kind who likes to curl up with a dictionary, and that is why I like this book. Only I would call it "Reclining With Grammar," because one tastes this book as one crunches an apple and puts one's feet on the couch. It is full of juice and nourishment, but one cannot grow fat or
smug on it. I would, in fact, ask all who aspire to teach to read this book because it inspires one to settle down with other books on language. For what this book is also about is the love and lore of learning.

Declining Grammar began as a series of essays on a variety of subjects relating to the English language. Thus this collection not only assays spelling reform and basic English but also brief, funny excursions into style, usage, fads, and politics. What his book of essays sets out to do is to encourage us not "to reject the facts of English ... to pursue the subject in all its fact and fancy well beyond the confines of these pages" (p. 7). To resist the facts, he suggests, is to remain forever tied to the idea that language is a set of prescriptions and that the ordinary person cannot crack the code. He wants to combat the notion that our language is in a state of decline. That is why he can turn over some of the myths we entertain about language, myths like "the linguistic fountain of youth" located in "a remote corner of the Ozarks or the Appalachians, where time stands still ..." (p. 9) (and so does language). He assures us that even though people may live isolated from others, they produce new forms of speech even as they maintain some of the old ones.

Baron believes it is a myth that "language both channels and limits how we think." ... that according to this myth, we can only conceive what our language has words to express" (p. 10). And he offers the example of the Eskimo language which has many words for "snow" but no term for the general concept. He says, "This deficiency does not mean that Eskimo inhibits abstraction in its speakers ..." (p. 11). Baron also debunks the idea that "the form of government in a given society determines the nature of its language" (p. 11). The title of his third chapter is "The Passive Voice Can Be Your Friend." Whoever said it couldn't? Orwell. He said it so well that two generations of high school English teachers grew up wary of "Orwell's moral evaluation of the passive voice" (p. 19). Now even though Baron makes very clear that "Orwell does use agentless passives both in his condemnation of the construction ... and throughout the essay ..." (p. 19), I think Baron misses the point when he argues that the passive voice cannot be restrained despite the poor press it continues to receive. I do not believe we, who still uphold Orwell's moral evaluation of the passive voice, desire to restrain it. We hope just to confine it. It is not that the passive voice is the enemy as much as those who use it to hide, obfuscate, or otherwise smother language and thought are the enemies.

In Chapter 18, "Nothing Like a Good Pun," Baron keeps his eyes and ears open for what he calls "wordplay" (p. 167). Rightfully, I think, he sees in names like "Cookie Cutter" for a hair dresser, or "Have an affair with us," the logo for a caterer, or "Talk dirty to us," the hallmark of a portable cleaning system, an exhibitionist quality. Rightfully, he sees "cutespeak" as "a predictable outgrowth of the many variants of "Happiness is a warm puppy" and "Have a nice day." He also attributes "cutespeak" to the taste of the yuppies for "lexical twists" (p. 162). I find, however, that Baron drifts off into naming rather than blaming, for what I see in "cutespeak" is not a fad but a sickness, a need for constant stimuli and titillation, in a people so bored that nothing shocks and nothing satisfies them.

I could continue in this vein, getting excited where Baron does not, hoping for more of what I call blaming rather than naming. In Chapter 24, "The English Language and the Constitution," Baron reviews the history of our changing attitudes toward other languages, and it is a fascinating excursion through some aspects of American history. Once upon a time broken English kept people from getting jobs, especially in teaching. A Brooklyn accent, the mark of an immigrant heritage could do it. Now actively broken English is no hindrance to employment. There is room for resentment here, and there is room for resentment
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when those employed cannot make themselves sufficiently understood, not only by the English-speaking majority, but by those who come from other ethnic backgrounds.

But I find this book of essays mostly delightful, especially the essay on grammar and the essay on myths concerning the teaching of English. In this chapter Baron presents what is to me the real problem in the training of English teachers. Here is how he puts the case: “One reason why language instruction is felt to be central, yet perceived to be inefficient is an educational philosophy that characterizes the teacher as an expert imparting knowledge to the student-novice, combined with an educational practice that effectively limits how much teachers may learn about the language they must teach” (p.49). The specific areas he points to are knowledge of the writing process and even knowledge of what constitutes standard English. I regret that Baron overlooks the splendid work The National Writing Project has contributed to these very questions, not to mention the pioneer work that it began in encouraging teachers to practice to become competent writers themselves. But how much teachers who service five classes a day can make themselves expert during inservice training or summer institutes needs to be debated. An English teacher should, I believe, begin training almost from the moment of conception. An English teacher should seek to know as much as possible about the nature of language and the history of English in particular, should, in fact, strive to know as much about the subject of English as does Professor Baron. The real value of this book is how much it makes the reader want to learn more.

Having come so far, would I take this book with me to my desert isle? You bet I would. And The Oxford Dictionary and Otto Jespersen and a box of dried apples, hard tack, and Camembert. It is the kind of book that keeps you hopping and hoping. It has so many facts about the state of the language, past and present that it keeps making you hungry for more.

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