# The Meaning Makers

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*Series Editor*: Professor Viv Edwards

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## Learning to Talk and Talking to Learn
## 2nd edition

Gordon Wells

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# *Prologue to the Second Edition*

As more than a quarter of a century has passed since the start of the Bristol Study, I need to start by explaining why I believe that a second edition is appropriate. First and foremost, although the context in which children learn to talk may be somewhat different today from what it was 25 years ago, the ways in which children's learning proceeds have not changed, as has been confirmed by more recent studies. And because the Bristol Study remains the largest and most representative longitudinal investigation of this process, *The Meaning Makers* can still provide food for thought concerning both the early stages and the transition from home to school. At the same time, there have also been significant changes in the intervening years, and some of these call for a reevaluation of the findings of the study. These I address in the final chapters.

From the perspective of these changes, it is interesting to consider how I might redesign the study if I were about to embark on it today. From a research point of view, one of the most significant developments has been in the field of information technology. When we began the study, the wireless microphone had just been invented and needed considerable modification for a one-year-old to wear it. Handheld video cameras and user-friendly computers were still a dream for the future. Now, almost every researcher has several video cameras and a laptop computer with a wide variety of software programmes for data analysis. With these tools researchers have been able to carry out both experimental and naturalistic studies of children learning a significant proportion of the world's languages, enabling them to formulate and test a variety of hypotheses about what is universal and what is context-dependent about children's language development (see Chapter 11). Nevertheless, I still would not use a video camera to record in children's homes, as the presence of a camera operator would certainly compromise the authentic naturalism that was a prime aim of our approach. On the other hand, a similar study today would certainly benefit from the ability to computerize the tasks of transcription, coding and quantitative analysis.

But it is not only the possibilities for research that have been transformed by technology. Recent inventions have also changed the contexts in which talk occurs. Today, many people seem to spend more time talking on their cell phones than in face-to-face conversation; young children play with walkie-talkies, and their older siblings listen to iPods, communicate on My Space, and spend much time playing computer games of increasing complexity and addictiveness. These changes in the part played by electronic communication and entertainment devices in people's lives has certainly affected what children talk about and how they spend their leisure time. Whether it has changed how they initially learn to talk is more debatable.

However, one significant social change that has almost certainly made a difference to the opportunities for language learning is that far more mothers now have full-time jobs, which means that, from a much earlier age, many children spend less time interacting with their mothers and other family members and much more in child care settings, which have a very different adult to child ratio than at home. If I were starting again, I would certainly want to include children whose parents are employed outside the home; a comparison between the interactions that a child experiences at home and those experienced in the various care settings would be particularly informative.

Schools, too, have changed. Many more schools today include children from a wider range of ethnic background as a result of the significant increase in emigration by families from countries racked by war or endemic poverty. For the children, the adjustment to a new culture and a new language is challenging, and extremely so for those who arrive in later childhood or adolescence; it is also a challenge for their teachers, who have to find ways to meet their emotional and social needs as well as ensuring their academic progress while they struggle to master the language of instruction. It would be particularly interesting to learn more about the effect of age of arrival or of starting preschool on the ease with which such children learn a second language outside the home.

The political and economic changes that have resulted from increasing globalization have also had a considerable impact on pedagogy and curriculum, as international competition has led to greater emphasis being placed on accountability at school and district levels. This, in turn, has led to a greater centralization of curriculum planning and an increased emphasis on testing, leading inevitably – in a high proportion of schools – to a focus on what will be tested rather than on encouraging students to develop their individual talents and interests. While making observations in school would still be very similar, the task of assessing achievement would be very much easier. In the 1970s we had to develop our own forms of assessment; today, this would certainly not be necessary!

But, equally important, I, too, have changed in the intervening years. First, I have been strongly influenced by the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues. Although Vygotsky died before I was born, his ideas only became known in the English-speaking world in the 1980s, following the publication of *Mind in Society*, an edited translation of some of his most important writings. Since then, the more I have read and thought about Vygotsky's theory of learning and development, the more it has seemed to provide the sort of encompassing theoretical framework that I needed to integrate my understanding of children's learning of their first language (and subsequent ones) with the goals and means of education. For this reason, in recent years cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) – as the current embodiment of Vygotsky's ideas is referred to – has formed the basis for my teaching and writing as well as my research.

The second major personal change has been in my stance as a researcher. In carrying out the Bristol Study, I adopted the traditional role of a social scientist: I selected a stratified random sample and proceeded to make regular observations of them. To the extent possible, I and my colleagues made every effort to avoid 'contaminating the data' by not engaging in discussion of the observations with the parents and teachers concerned and by not sharing our underlying hypotheses with the 'subjects' of the research. This, I still believe, was the appropriate stance to adopt, given the aim of the project – to describe the naturally occurring opportunities for language learning by a representative sample of children.

However, in 1984, at the conclusion of the Bristol Study, I moved to Toronto to join the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.[1] Henceforth, although I would also be contributing to the doctoral programme, I saw my major responsibilities as continuing to carry out research in classrooms and to teach practicing teachers who were studying part-time to gain a Master's degree in Education. Indeed, I hoped to find ways of integrating these two activities. However, knowing little about schools in Canada, I felt ill prepared to undertake my new responsibilities. Furthermore, despite having formed some strong convictions about the relationship between learning and teaching, and the central role of language in both, I had not previously thought about how to present them to practicing teachers, nor was I sure how they would be received in the Canadian context. Clearly, I needed to spend time in classrooms, getting to know them from the teachers' and students' perspectives.

This was a new situation for me. Up until then I had visited classrooms as a researcher, attempting to be the unobserved observer, recording my observations, evaluating them, and telling the 'truth' about what I had seen when invited to speak or write about my research. Given this traditional 'objective' stance, I had not shared my observations with the teachers, nor had I asked them about their intentions for the lessons I observed or for their own evaluations about what had been more or less successful. If I were to work *with* teachers, I realized, this stance would not be appropriate. I would have to become a participant before I could presume to offer my researcher's opinions and I would have to treat them as co-investigators with me rather than as providers of data for my personal research.

The need to change was very forcibly brought home to me during the new longitudinal research project that I started in Toronto. In planning this project, which was designed to investigate the school experiences and progress of children from different language backgrounds: Portuguese, Greek, Cantonese and English, I had planned to share the observations that my research team was making with the teachers, in the hope that they could form the basis for collaborative explorations of ways of better supporting English language learners. However, this did not prove easy, as many of the teachers – perhaps having already been 'subjects' for other researchers – were reluctant to become involved in the way I had hoped. This became very apparent as we prepared for the second year.

At the end of the first year the children we were observing moved up a grade and so we had to secure the cooperation of the new group of teachers into whose classes these children would be entering. Fortunately, despite not having been consulted in the initial planning stage, in all but one case, these new teachers were willing to have us make observations in their classrooms. But one grade three teacher absolutely refused.

Immediately I learned of her refusal, I went to talk with her and she gave the following explanation. Two years earlier she had attended a conference in Toronto at which I had been a guest speaker. During my presentation, I had played short extracts from some of the Bristol classroom recordings and offered my comments on the opportunities for learning that each provided. About one particular teacher-whole class discussion I had been rather critical, pointing out how the teacher had engaged her grade one children in an extended episode of 'guess what's in teacher's mind' instead of listening to what they had found interesting about the visit they had just made to a nearby castle.

'You're not going to do that to me,' she declared. And as I listened to her, I knew she was right. The stance I had taken in the past was both unethical and unproductive. In effect, I had been exploiting my 'subjects', not only giving little in return for their participation but also sometimes criticizing them in public (even though, of course, anonymously) when they had no chance to put their own points of view. But even from the point of view of a collector of data, my approach had also been misguided, if my aim was to understand the reality of learning and teaching as it happens in a particular place and time. Classrooms are communities in which, over time, the participants develop particular ways of acting and interacting; these cannot be understood by an outsider who pays occasional visits to collect and take away for analysis limited stretches of observational data, extracted from their organic historical context.

Fortunately, this teacher did eventually agree to participate – and she also taught me an important lesson in the process. Equally fortunate, in the second year, several teachers took up the offer to become co-investigators with me and I discovered how much more could be achieved by approaching research as a collaborative activity, in which the teacher and I would work together to make sense of the events in which we and the children were all involved and, on that basis, to consider changes that might be made. Ever since then I have carried out all my research as a collaborative action researcher.

In the light of all these developments, I was very pleased to be invited to prepare a second edition of *The Meaning Makers.* Not only is this an opportunity to re-present some of the key findings of the Bristol Study that challenge the current emphasis on accountability as the mechanism that is supposed to improve the quality of education for all children – as in the 'No Child Left Behind' legislation in the United States; but it also provides an opportunity to revisit the Bristol Study and to consider how its findings can contribute to ongoing efforts to improve the quality of public education. In many important ways, I believe, the questions raised in 1986 are still of supreme importance today: What are we educating children for? How can schools give equal emphasis to fostering initiative and innovation, on the one hand, while maintaining continuity with the achievements of the past, on the other? And how should we prepare the teachers of today so that, through them, we can positively influence the values and dispositions that the citizens of tomorrow form in the classrooms in which they learn today?

In thinking about how to rework the original edition, I wondered about the best way to bring it up to date. In the end, I decided to leave the original chapters more or less as they were, since the data and findings have not changed; but I have included references to more recent research where appropriate. On the other hand, I have added three new chapters and extended the final chapter in order to give an overview of the ways in which understanding about early language development and the role of language in learning and teaching has developed since the first edition was published.

The first of these new chapters (Chapter 11) reviews the research on children's language development from a contemporary, 'functional' perspective. What is new about this perspective is the serious attention it gives to the relationship between the development of language by the human species and the language development of contemporary individuals. As the result of empirical research in a wide range of disciplines, from neurolinguistics to archaeology, and from studies of higher primates to longitudinal studies of human infants, a consensus is developing which rejects the assumption that language development requires a species-specific 'language organ' – an 'innate language acquisition device' – as proposed by Chomsky and others. Instead, from this functional perspective, the emergence of language in the human species is seen to be the outcome of *cultural evolution* which, co-occurring and interacting with *biological evolution* of the brain and vocal tract, exploited humans' increased oral capabilities to serve the needs of inter-generational learning and teaching which, itself, was made possible by the prior biological evolution of human infants' predisposition to see other humans as intentional agents like themselves and to learn from them. Further support for this explanation comes from the parallelism between the two time scales – phylogenetic (species) and ontogenetic (individual) – with respect to the sequence of development. On both these time scales, speech is seen to emerge from earlier forms of interaction and communication in which action and gesture are the earliest forms of sharing intentions and making meaning.

The recordings of the children in the Bristol Study cannot throw any light on the very earliest forms of communication since they registered only sound. However, from the beginning, as we listened to the tapes, two features of the children's communication were very apparent. First was its functional orientation. As Halliday (1975) found in his longitudinal study of Nigel, it was nearly always possible to interpret the children's communicative intentions (e.g. indicating, requesting), even when the specific entity or event being referred to was unclear from the utterance itself. And second was the systematic use of intonation to distinguish between possible intentions. Taken together, these two features convinced us that what was driving the children's language development was the desire to share intentions. The adults with whom the children communicated also seemed, for the most part, to understand this, as was evidenced by their frequent checking to make sure they had understood the child's intention before replying, and by their evident concern – on most occasions – to help the children to explore their intentions further. Looking back, I think I can claim with considerable confidence that our interpretation of the data we had collected was an early contribution to the functional theory of language development that has since been developed and which I describe in Chapter 11.

In Chapter 12, I take stock of what has been learned from research over the last 50 years about the importance of language for children's social, emotional and intellectual development and about how adults – both parents and teachers – can support and enrich their development through the activities and interactions in which they engage with them. In schools, in particular, much of this research has been influenced by the ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, leading to an increasing emphasis on dialogue in both whole-class and small group activities and on collaborative knowledge building rather than on teacher transmission and on competition between students as individuals. In this chapter, I report on many important initiatives that hold promise for the future. Unfortunately, though, the pervasive governmental emphasis on accountability by means of high-stakes testing has meant that there has, as yet, been little change in practice in the majority of classrooms.

The final additional chapter (Chapter 13) extends the work in Bristol by describing my most recent research, which has involved collaborative investigations with teachers to explore ways of improving opportunities for learning in schools. As explained earlier, as a result of observing the Bristol children in school, I had come to realize that the ways in which language was used in the classroom were, for the most part, very different from its use for the sort of collaborative meaning making that children experienced at home. It was not that the teachers I observed were not interested in the children in their charge or not keen to help them develop their command of language in its spoken and written forms. Rather, the problem seemed to be that many did not recognize that this development most readily occurs through using language to explore new ideas and solve authentic problems that are of importance to everyone involved. In most of the classrooms I had observed, it was the teacher who, following the curriculum guide, decided what would be talked or written about, who asked the questions, and who decided what were acceptable answers. As a result, children quickly learned that their own ideas were of little significance; their task was to answer the teacher's questions, not to ask their own. In effect, by being constrained in the ways they used