LITTLE LEARNING; LESS GRAMMAR: OBSERVATIONS ON CURRICULUM FOR ENGLISH AS A FIRST ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

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In this article it is argued that the theory underpinning the Department of Basic Education's National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) on English as First Additional Language (Grades 10–12) might not be suitable for South African pupils. This is because it is biased towards a communicative model and, while this approach usually produces relatively fluent speakers of English, it also often produces pupils whose written competence is poor. The reasons for this are partly because of the lack of grammar teaching and the unsuitability of a text-based approach that encourages incidental attention to grammatical structures. It is further argued that a form-focused approach might be a more successful one to adopt within the South African context.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2011, a few of the first cohort of the Department of Education's (DoE) Outcomes Based Education (OBE) learners graduated with their first degrees. These new graduates will be congratulated, as were their predecessors, but their achievement should be considered all the more laudable as the odds against their graduating seem to have increased in recent years. According to the National Benchmark Tests Project[1] produced for the vice-chancellors' association Higher Education in South Africa (HESA), the objectives of which were to assess the literacy and mathematics proficiency amongst first-year students, fewer than a third of our students graduate within five years of entering university. More than half will drop out and never graduate. Fewer than half first-year university students have the academic literacy skills to succeed without support, and most cannot adequately read, write or comprehend English, the dominant language in higher education. Only 47% are proficient in English and roughly the same proportion (46%) fall into the 'intermediate' category, while 7% have only 'basic' academic literacy. The results of the tests show that the school system is clearly failing our learners in English.

Academics in the tertiary sector often find that their second-language students of English are fairly confident, and apparently fluent in the spoken variety of the language, but weak in the written variety. It is generally acknowledged that their written English reveals a large number of morphological and syntactic errors, such as incorrect word-order, incorrect tenses and concords, and the preponderance to use run-on sentences and sentence fragments when complete, well-made sentences are called for in writing. These basic errors are often compounded by an inability to structure paragraphs properly, to create clear links between ideas and to make smooth transitions from one paragraph to the next. In short, their written discourse frequently lacks cohesion and is poorly constructed.

In this article, I explore aspects of how, in recent years, curriculum statements for English as a First Additional Language (FAL) might have exacerbated the problems surrounding English, rather than alleviated them. These curricula include the OBE National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for English as a First Additional Language (FAL), its predecessor, the National Senior Certificate syllabus for English Second Language (L2) and the current National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). Some of the causes for the dismal state in the proficiency level of English probably lie within these statements. These causes will be investigated here.

All learners in South Africa are required to take a home language, that is usually their first language (L1), and a first additional language, that is usually their second language (L2), at Grade 12 level. English is by far the most commonly chosen first additional language amongst the 91.5% of our population who are not mother-tongue speakers of English.

Over the last 25 to 30 years there has been a shift in the way second languages have been taught in many parts of the world. Broadly speaking, this shift has been from a synthetic approach to an analytic one. The synthetic approach stresses teaching grammatical, lexical, phonological and functional units separately in the hope that the learner will synthesise these discrete elements and master the language, while an analytic approach stresses the meaning of the language and is content-based. The latest CAPS curriculum and its recent predecessors reflect this shift.

BACKGROUND TO L2 TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICA

In essence, the shift in English language teaching in South Africa has been away from traditional grammar-based learning, where the grammar of the language was itself an object of study and grammarians prescribed the 'correct' forms of the language. This prescriptive grammar teaching has roots going back to 18th century European models of learning languages that hark back to a Graeco-Latin mould in which modern languages were squeezed into a classical mould. During the first half of the 20th century, and right up to the 1960s, this tradition surfaced in South African L2 textbooks that usually grouped the contents of the grammar books into categories such as *noun classes* or *tenses of the verb*. Grammatical explanations were typically followed by endless discrete-point type exercises that, no doubt guided by the then currently influential behaviourist school of thought, were designed to assist the learner to memorise the linguistic feature by much repetition.

During this period, the spoken variety was given scant attention in schools and universities, and the end product of this kind of instruction was often students whose knowledge of *parts of speech*, *sentence analysis* and the *rules* that govern a language was good but whose ability to speak the language appropriately was poor. Those who did master the spoken variety well, despite being taught in this traditional way, usually had broad exposure to it and thus acquired fluency because of such exposure. This might typically have been the scenario experienced by Afrikaans L1 speakers in urban environments during the 1960s, where their exposure to English was extensive, or by English L1 speakers growing up in rural villages, where their exposure to Afrikaans was extensive. Regular exposure helped promote a competence and fluency that probably had little to do with the grammar exercises, such as rewriting the *bedrywende* (active) into the *lydende* (passive) form, they learned in school.

In the 1960s, there was a worldwide movement away from these traditional ways of teaching L2 languages towards an audio-lingual approach that highlighted listening and speaking in the

L2. Language laboratories were a feature in many universities, where L2 learners were encouraged to reinforce their patterned responses by mimicry and repetition in an approach that continued to be founded on the behaviourist school of psychology. This was followed by a broadly communicative approach to L2 learning and teaching that attempted to recreate the environment outside the classroom in order to produce the communicatively competent speakers that linguists observed as being products of acquiring the L2 naturally. This new teaching methodology was underpinned by theorists such as Chomsky (1965:25), who defined grammar not as a set of rules in a book that govern language but as a type of set of rules in the mind that can be adapted to any language to allow a child to acquire innately any language to which he or she is exposed during the formative years.

The communicative approach

In addition to Chomsky's views, a prevailing interest in sociolinguistics and pragmatics arose. The mix of these theories and ideas sparked the revolution against the traditional grammatical approach to teaching and ushered in the communicative approach. The reconceptualising of language behaviour by people like the American sociolinguist Hymes (1971) and the British linguist Halliday (1975) had a great influence on the way L2s were taught. These sociolinguists provided an enriched view of language and showed how it was much more than rules of grammar. Hymes (1971) suggested that the approach taken by Chomskyan linguistics was too narrow a view for those who would study language in society. His ideas that sociolinguistic rules as important as the rules of grammar exist and that 'a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate' (1972:277) had considerable influence on teaching methodology. Savignon (1983:10) summed up these views succinctly when she noted that

> The notion of communicative competence goes *beyond* narrowly defined linguistics and learning psychology to the fields of anthropology and sociology. It looks at language not as individual behaviour but as one of many symbolic systems that members of a society use for communication among themselves. People and the languages they use are viewed not in isolation but in their social contexts or settings.

This comprises a neat summation of this broadened view of communicative competence.

Linguists such as Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Littlewood (1981), Richards and Rogers (1986), Savignon (1983), and Widdowson (1978) took the ideas of the sociolinguists into the classroom and emphasised the importance of message conveyance and meaningful communication in social settings. In these classrooms, a typical lesson involves information-gap activities that are set up by the teacher following a communicative language teaching lesson design, and learners are expected to listen to an audiotape, read a passage, and then use information thus gleaned to do an exercise either in pairs or in group work, where they exchange meaningful information with each other to complete the task. Role-play, simulation, and the centrality of message-focus are key ingredients of these lessons. In order to give the message-focus prime importance, language input is treated as *use* and not *usage,* to borrow Widdowson's terms (1978). Widdowson contrasted *use* and *usage* to indicate the difference between language that carries messages and language that is used simply to provide exemplars of grammatical structure.

In emphasising the importance of fluency and building confidence in the use of the L2, the teaching of grammar was often completely neglected. It was believed that plenty of practice would provide opportunities for acquisition processes to work and for fluency and accuracy to develop naturally.

DoBE NCS: English First Additional Language
It is this theoretical background that informs the NCS for FAL curriculum and also the latest CAPS documentation. While, with the introduction of CAPS, the terminology *Learning Outcomes* and *Assessment Standards* has gone, the thrust of curriculum remains a communicative one. A statement in the CAPS for Grades 10-12 reads,

2.5 Teaching the First Additional Language

In order to learn an additional language well, one needs as much exposure as possible. Teachers should therefore ensure that learners listen to and read the Additional Language for a wide range of purposes. They need opportunities to listen to the Additional Language for information (e.g. the news) and for pleasure (e.g. a story or song). Even more importantly, they need opportunities to read and view the additional language for information (e.g. an explanation with an accompanying diagram), pleasure (e.g. a magazine) and literary appreciation (e.g. a poem). (DoBE, 2011:9)

In addition to being grounded in the communicative approach, the curriculum advocates a text-based approach. This approach 'teaches learners to become competent, confident and critical readers, writers, viewers and designers of texts'(DoBE, 2011:16), and in the latest CAPS for FAL, some swing towards a more systematic teaching of language structures is noticeable. While in the earlier NCS for FAL, formal aspects of language were not to be taught 'in an isolated way' (DoE, 2003:15), they are now to be taught 'also as part of a systematic language development programme' (DoBE, 2011: 8). Despite this slight change of emphasis, teachers are still encouraged to 'deal with these aspects of language in context' (DoBE, 2011:9) and the time allocation suggested in the curriculum for 'language structure' is just 10%:

Skills	Time Allocation per Two-Week Cycle (Hours)	%
Listening & Speaking	1	10
Reading & Viewing: Comprehension & Literature	4	45
Writing & Presenting	3	35
Language structure (this is also integrated into the 4 skills)	1	10

(DoBE, 2011:15)

PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

A number of researchers have questioned whether plenty of practice in an L2 can produce accurate, target-like structures. In a well-known paper, Schmidt (1983) described how a Japanese artist, Wes, never improved his non-target-like English over a 3-year period, despite living in Hawaii and mixing, almost entirely, with native English speakers. His English is characteried by an almost complete lack of surface structure markings, non-English word-order and confused tense:

> I know I'm speaking funny English / because I'm never learning / I'm only just listen / then talk / but people understand / well / some people confuse / before OK / but now is little bit difficult / because many people I'm meeting only just one time. (Schmidt, 1983:168)

Schmidt (1983) argued in this early paper that Wes's failure to acquire much grammar has little to do with social or psychological distance (i.e. acculturation and affective factors) from the native speakers, as he mixed freely, spoke rapidly and with confidence, and showed no signs of feeling insecure. He attributes Wes's failure to learn the grammatical rules to lack of interest in linguistic analysis and the ability to get by using compensatory strategies. Many L2 speakers of English in our SA tertiary institutions display a similar confidence and fluency in the spoken variety. It seems possible that this has been gained at the expense of competence in the written variety.

During the last decade of the 20th century, many others questioned the assumption that a purely communicative approach provided an environment for successful grammar learning. These included Carroll and Swain (1993), Cook (1994), DeKeyser (1998), Doughty and Williams (1998), Ellis (1997, 2001), Lightbrown (1998), Rutherford (1987), and Taron and Swain (1995). More recent studies in instructed L2 learning and the theories that support them include those by Ellis, Loewen, and Basturkmen (2003), Gass and Selinker, (2008), Hausen and Pierrard (2005), Laufer (2005), and VanPattern and Williams (2007). Some of the main arguments against a purely communicative approach include the following:

- It is questionable whether a classroom situation can ever adequately recreate the kind of input that is found in the natural environment and it may be argued that it is not sufficiently rich in appropriate structures to ensure accurate grammar learning.
- Learners, especially beginner learners, find it difficult to concentrate both on the content of the lesson and the form of the language that they are supposed to be acquiring – yet this is what is required by the NCS, where the primary focus is on content and meaning and the form of the language is acquired as a by-product.
- Most learners, when faced with the dilemma of concentrating on content or form, will prioritise content and neglect form.
- Because learners interact primarily with other learners, there is insufficient positive evidence of structures in the next phase that learners are developmentally ready to acquire.
- Incorrect features may be learned because they are constantly reinforced by other L2 learners who have also not noticed the error (Schmidt, 1995). These features eventually become processed and automatised, resulting in the learner ending up with a non-target-like L2 in which these features have fossilised.

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A particularly disturbing aspect of the communicative approach is outlined in this last bullet. This scenario seems a likely one in South Africa, where, partly because of the legacy of apartheid, many learners are still often relatively isolated in their language groups and lack much opportunity to mix with mother-tongue speakers of English. This reinforces the possibility that learners may co-construct non-target-like forms and then proceduralise and internalise them. In some schooling scenarios, this may even be exacerbated by their teachers, who themselves have internalised, fossilised and non-standard forms of the language.

Swain (1998),who conducted research in Canada involving tape-recording collaborative pair work, showed that those pairs who had co-constructed inaccurate forms reproduced them in a post-test one week later. This finding confirms an earlier study by Prabhu (1987), who, working with Hispanic citizens in the United States of America, argued that because much of the discourse to which the learner is exposed in a purely communicative classroom is deficient and distorted in a number of respects, the learner will learn a non-target-like form. Gass and Lakshmanan (1991), also in the USA, found in a longitudinal study, that a significant correlation existed between deviant input and learner's output. In the case of Alberto, a Spanish learner of English, Doughty and Varela (1998) reported that, by using recasts to give negative evidence to learners, this problem may be partly overcome. They noted that learners who were shown that their utterances contained incorrect forms (such as the use of the present tense when the past was required) would usually repeat the utterance incorporating the recast correctly. Many believe that with only positive evidence, and without this negative evidence, the learners will continue to use the incorrect forms.

Another problem with purely communicative classrooms is that learners tend to use only their L1 in group work – an observation made by Tarone and Swain (1995). This is also the experience of some of my colleagues and I who teach English to L2 tertiary learners, where, even when there are speakers in the group who do not understand the language used by the group majority, they persist in using it, thus losing the opportunity to practice English and isolating those who cannot understand their L1.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks to the inclusion of more grammar teaching in L2 curricula has been the influential non-interface position advocated by Krashen (1982). He makes the fundamental distinction between 'acquisition' that is essentially the same unconscious process of picking up an L1 and 'learning' that is a conscious process that happens in a formal classroom where learners are given grammatical explanations. His hypothesis that learned knowledge cannot become acquired knowledge and that anything a learner wants to say originates in his or her acquired knowledge remains empirically untested. Yet this, and his other hypotheses, such as the Monitor Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis, have an almost instinctive appeal to many teachers who observe two kinds of language behaviour amongst their students – fluent, evidently intuitive use, and a more ponderous, seemingly learned use. Most agree that this happens, but there is considerable disagreement as to what underpins each of these behaviours and whether learned knowledge can become proceduralised into automatised language use. Ellis (2001) and Doughty and Williams (1998) are amongst those who have pointed out that we do not know exactly how implicit knowledge is acquired. This has not been explained as no-one has yet penetrated the workings of the 'black box' which allows us to acquire language. Chomsky's work (1997) on the *Minimalist Programme* is attempting to do this, as he explores the principle of *Economy* in which there are no superfluous elements in grammar, and the links between sound and meaning are as close as possible (Cook:1997). This research is, however, in its early days and is accessible to very few, and certainly not to

the average teacher. All this has seemingly led many teachers to adopt the communicative approach and an easy-going, and possibly resigned, attitude to L2 language teaching which accepts that an L2 can only be acquired and not learned, and that, other than provide plenty of meaningful activities and opportunities to listen, speak, read and write in the L2, there is little they can do to promote linguistic accuracy.

Lightbrown (1998) noted how all-pervasive these new approaches to language teaching have become when she described how classroom teachers give her 'minilectures on the value of unfettered communication in the classroom, the power of comprehensible input, and perhaps above all, the danger of raising the affective filter by correcting learners' errors when they are in the midst of a communicative act (Krashen,1982)!' (cited in Lightbrown, 1998:190). She went on to point out, wryly, that the teachers who have so wholeheartedly embraced this communicative approach orthodoxy would, in all likelihood, be unable to trace its origins or explain the hypothesis underpinning it.

CONCLUSION

It is possible the communicative approach may work in a truly acquisition-rich environment where the participants are highly motivated and are in a small-group learning situation. This would require a highly skilled and knowledgeable teacher who is able to juggle giving linguistic support and facilitating the learning task at hand. In the reality of the average South African classroom, however, where the number of learners often exceeds 40, there are many pitfalls in attempting to use this approach. The teacher must try to maintain discourse control and almost instantaneously find teaching strategies that will address the grammatical features that the learners are lacking. Attempting to cope with these pressures, covering all the outcomes listed, dealing with their complexity, and keeping track of which outcomes one has covered in this haphazard way, dictated by the communicative and text-based approach, must put a tremendous strain on teachers who are teaching eight or nine lessons a day.

It would seem that some of the problems surrounding the inability of many of our tertiary L2 learners of English to write well-constructed English might rest with the recent DoBE curricula in the higher grades. The assumption that young adults in these grades can learn the many grammatical structures required without some concentrated focus on grammatical forms is questionable. While the communicative and text-based approach may work well with children in the lower grades who have the ability to acquire grammatical forms of the language through interaction alone, the young adults at the other end of the schooling spectrum may need to process the language data cognitively by formulating and testing hypotheses against the target language structures. It is important that our learners have some grammatical knowledge about the structures of English and some meta-language with which to describe them. Without these, the learners will remain in the dark about why they are required by their teachers to make changes in their texts when they have made language errors. They must be given sufficient linguistic knowledge to understand why they are incorrect. There is little point in writing in the margin of a learner's assignment "Your concord is wrong" or even "Your concord between subject and verb is wrong" when they are unable to identify the subject or the verb and have never been taught the concept of grammatical concord.

While in the discredited traditional approach, used before the communicative approach, the teaching of abstract concepts such as sentence structures, tense, mood, and parts of speech was probably introduced too early to young learners who struggled to understand them, we

now seem to have neglected them altogether. It might be that the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction and we need gradually to introduce a focus on the form of the language, beginning around puberty when the learner is probably cognitively ready to learn these forms.

Considerable interest has been shown by authors in overseas journals in what is known as a form-focused approach to the teaching of an L2. In South Africa, however, with the noticeable exception of the article by Ollerhead and Oosthuizen (2005), there has been little interest. It might be that we ought to be researching the form-focused approach to L2 learning with an eye to introducing it for our young adult learners in Grades 10-12. It is a flexible approach that embraces various instruction models that could be adopted to bring about more efficient language teaching and improve the standard of the written discourse of our L2 English learners.

END NOTES
[1]*National Benchmark Tests Project* 2009. Report produced for the vice-chancellors' association of Higher Education South Africa (HESA). Retrieved 8 January 2011, from http://www.hesa-enrol.ac.za/about.htm

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