

UNATHI: THE CASE STUDY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN ESL LEARNER WHO EXCELS AT WRITING IN ENGLISH

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This article discusses the case study of a learner in Mdantsane Township in the Eastern Cape. Most black learners find it difficult to express themselves effectively in English. According to a survey made by Bot (1996) majority of black grade 7 learners are unable to read in English. Many black learners in South Africa The study, which focused on five learners was an attempt to explain why some learners whose mother tongue is Xhosa are an exceptionally proficient writers of English. The article describes one of these learners and his writing practices. The data collected include formal interviews with this learner as well as an analysis of some of his writing. Some tentative conclusions are reached relating to the role of the teacher and certain affective factors. The article concludes with a few implications for researching teachers.

Engels is de facto die lingua franca in die openbare lewe in Suid-Afrikaanse stede. Swart Suid-Afrikaners beskou Engels as 'n taal met prestige, voordele en geleenthede. Op hoërskool en daarna is vaardigheid in Engels 'n beduidende bepaler van onderwyssukses. Die feit benadeel 'n groot aantal swart leerders. Volgens 'n opname deur Bot (1996) kan die meerderheid van die swart graad 7-leerders nie Engels lees nie. In hierdie artikel word die skryfontwikkeling van 'n hoërskoolleerder in die dorpie Mdantsane in die Oos-Kaap bespreek. Hierdie gevallestudie vorm deel van 'n meer omvattende studie wat op vyf leerders fokus en wat poog om te verduidelik waarom sommige leerders wie se moedertaal Xhosa is, uiters bekwame skrywers van Engels is. Die data wat aangebied word, sluit formele onderhoude met die leerder sowel as 'n analise van enkele van sy skryfstukke in. Tentatiewe gevolgtrekkings gaan oor die rol van die onderwyser en bepaalde affektiewe faktore. Die artikel sluit af met 'n paar implikasies vir onderwysers wat by navorsing betrokke wil wees.

INTRODUCTION

The case of Unathi

Unathi is a Grade 12 learner who lives in Mdantsane Township in the Eastern Cape. At school Unathi shares a dilapidated classroom with seventy-two classmates. There are only fifteen desks in the class. Depending on their size and who gets there first, about four learners share the same desk. Those who cannot fit in, sit on top of their books or on the bare cement floor. The teacher brings to class about ten textbooks for a language exercise, and the learners scramble to gain access to a textbook. The majority can hardly see the page, let alone find a

way of writing responses to the exercises. The teacher does not know how to handle the situation in the class, nor is she comfortable with teaching English, as she is not qualified to do so.

After school, Unathi goes home. Home is a one-roomed multi-purpose shack that he shares with his mother and five siblings. In the dim room, on a bookshelf that stands against the wall, are copies of several newspapers, a Concise Oxford Dictionary, a few magazines, novels and about five volumes of an encyclopaedia. Luxury items in the room include a small radio, a portable black and white television set and a telephone with a note-pad next to it. Unathi cannot play the radio now, because the battery, charged by solar panel, still needs a little more sun to last them through the night. In the 'bedroom' corner that he shares with his siblings, he dresses in older clothes, and leaves the house to recharge the television battery at the local garage. Much later he takes his books out of his school bag and does his homework. Then he takes out an English novel that a friend has lent him, and reads it by candlelight.

Unathi is an exception. Bot (1996:15) reports a statistical survey on literacy in South Africa which discloses that in 1995 80% of Africans were still unable to read when they reached Grade 7. Placement examinations for university admission show that most ESL learners who wish to undertake tertiary study lack adequate proficiency, and even those who are admitted cannot, by and large, cope readily with the written work required of them in academic classes (Reid 1993:29). In response there is a common trend in almost all tertiary institutions in South Africa to offer an: 'English for Academic Purposes' course for first year ESL learners.

ESL is a concept, which requires considerable qualification in South Africa. For most high school students, English is not in fact a *second* language, but a third or fourth. On the other hand, it is more important to them than second languages usually are. Most immediately, English is an unavoidable fact in their schooling. I shall expand on this point later. However, the classroom is not the prime consideration. Driving the demand for English is the substantially valid perception that English is a key to social and economic advancement beyond the immediate community.

Reading and writing - what Reid (1993:15) refers to as 'makers of knowledge' - seem to be skills with which most ESL learners struggle the most. Needless to say, this has serious implications for the learners concerned, especially as they have to compete in an environment, which assumes literacy in English. That may not initially appear to be so. A superficial look at the present situation in South African schools may seem promising for students who are speakers of African languages, as the policy currently in force promotes a bi-or multilingual medium of instruction (MOI), thereby 'reducing' the emphasis on English. Not only that, but the present language policy permits learners to choose their home language as MOI provided that that is reasonably practicable. What this implies, is that South African students do not need to take English as a subject, nor do they need it to pass matric. In practice, however, English is becoming increasingly important, and in the world of work English is generally of obvious importance.

If the difficulties are to be faced, there can be no sidestepping the importance of the school situation, so a brief characterisation of it is called for. Teachers use English textbooks and setwork to teach the language. As there are not enough of these for all the students, the books have to be kept at the school. As the majority of the students have very little if any exposure to the printed word at home, the only opportunity students get to read in English is in class, during the English period. This is because many teachers of content subjects like history and geography could not be bothered about language, as they tend to divorce content from

language by emphasising only ‘facts’. The English teaching situation has become such that even if the teacher is competent and confident enough to conduct the lesson in English throughout, it is highly likely that only two or three students will be able to move with the flow of the lesson. What most teachers feel compelled to do in order to bring the rest of the class on board, is to teach English through the medium of Xhosa. The situation is so bad that as a teacher there were times when I had actually to say to my students, ‘This is the part of the story where you are supposed to laugh’. Sadly, they would then start laughing.

In the circumstances, tackling the problems of reading and writing head on is understandable, and research into English Second Language (ESL) writing in South Africa has given a great deal of attention to the ‘difficulties’ and ‘problems’ experienced by students. Against the background of the kind of classroom I have characterised, that is understandable. However, such an approach uses a ‘deficit model’ to understand the issues. In my research I have opted for a different approach, working rather on the assumption that it would be useful to examine the factors conducive to success.

Why are some learners from former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools significantly more proficient writers than most of their peers? In attempting to find answers to this question, I examined the cases of five successful learners from different grades in an Eastern Cape township high school. I explored the kinds of activities that these learners engage in, the role that significant others may play, and various other contextual factors that might impact on their writing ability. The research has its limitations, but it presents suggestive and potentially useful conclusions.

Originally undertaken for my Master’s thesis, (Ntete 1998), the investigation covered much more than can be reported here. The focus of this article is on one of the cases, Unathi, but the other four cases are drawn on in coming to some major conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

In exploring the factors conducive to the success of the learners I selected, my methods were ethnographic, involving appropriate triangulation. For the case studies, I interviewed the learners and their teachers in relaxed settings, observed learner performance directly in the classroom, and analysed those samples of the learners’ work that they considered their very ‘best’ pieces. I also had informal talks with their Xhosa teachers, to see whether there was a link between L1 and L2 writing ability.

Exploring the case of only one learner per grade makes some qualification of the results necessary. Alfery (1994:49) identifies lack of validity, reliability, and generalisation as ‘the three biggest sources’ of criticism leveled at single case studies. I will briefly discuss these aspects, showing how I sought to handle these ‘potential threats’ to the effectiveness of my research.

Validity

The concept of validity concerns the extent to which the material collected by the researcher presents a true and accurate picture of what it claims is being described (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995:105). When applied to the ESL writing context, the concept raises two main questions: the appropriacy to the study of the way the learners were selected, and the extent

to which the results can be relied on.

The learners were selected by their teachers at my request. The teachers had a fairly clear understanding of the purpose of the research. Nevertheless, a number of subjective factors may have influenced the selection. It is clear, however, that the learners were all significant achievers, and so were suitable for my research.

In discussing whether the results can be relied on, trustworthiness rather than validity is probably a more appropriate criterion in research of this naturalistic and non-positivistic nature. Reality here is seen as 'relative to our mind and the particular historical settings within which we are attempting to make our knowledge claims' (Lynch 1996:53). 'Trustworthiness' is closely associated with 'credibility'. A study is 'trustworthy' if it is 'credible', i.e. if there is a match between the constructed realities as represented by the evaluator and those attributed to the various stakeholders.

The triangulation, which I discuss later, strongly supports the trustworthiness of my account. However, it has to be acknowledged that several factors could have influenced the learners' and teachers' presentation of themselves. Despite my best efforts, the interviews were undoubtedly perceived as threatening by some and as an opportunity to make a good impression by others. Teachers may, to some extent, have told me what they thought I wanted to hear, and learners may have misrepresented their writing practices, again seeking to give me what they thought I wanted to hear. Learners may also have omitted information through modesty or embarrassment. In interpreting their responses, I may myself have failed to see some things and overemphasised others. While it is good to acknowledge such limitations, the data collected has a coherence which suggests no significant grounds for assuming that the possible limitations have radically affected the trustworthiness of the report.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the extent to which any particular research is replicable. The question to ask here is whether another researcher, using the same methodology, would get similar findings. According to Cooper and Odell (1997:ix) for example, a reliable rank ordering of a group of writers could be achieved by looking at more than one piece of writing on more than one occasion. The process should involve two or more people in describing each piece, and this he refers to as 'inter-rater' reliability. I did comply with the first criterion. The second condition was not met, as only one teacher rated the learner's pieces of work in each case. As the findings do not depend on any accurate rank ordering, as the learners were undoubtedly in the top group, and as there was a complex of interrelated factors in each learner's case, this criterion is of limited importance. Qualitative, ethnographic studies have much wider boundaries of tolerance in this regard than strictly empirical studies, which must be quite tightly replicable.

Representativeness

The extent to which the situation, individual or groups investigated are typical or representative of the situation, individual or groups as a whole, is a measure of the representativeness of the study.

By its very nature, ethnographic enquiry focuses on single cases or at most on a limited setting or action. In a sense, the act of choosing the learner was deliberately 'non-representative', because the subjects had to be the best ESL writers in the opinions of their teachers. However, there can be no question that they were good. As the research was

concerned with what makes for good achievement as an ESL writer, they were adequately representative.

Triangulation

Because of the limitations I have outlined, a means of enhancing the value of the research had to be sought. It was achieved through 'triangulation' or the use of 'multiple sources of evidence'. Different methods were combined to obtain a fuller and more substantial understanding of the issue being researched. Teacher and learner interviews were conducted, one learner was observed at work in the classroom context, and as many of the learners' written pieces as possible were analysed.

Analysis of data

The data obtained was analysed for emerging trends, and from this certain categories were developed. The first step was a direct word for word transcription of the learner interviews, followed by a translation thereof into English. The transcripts were then analysed as to the extent to which learners code switched between their L1, which is Xhosa, and English. Other categories used for analysis included 'confidence in English-speaking ability', 'literacy in the home language'; 'overall performance at school'; 'attitudes towards learning English'; 'motivation'; association with native speakers of English'; 'favourite radio and television programmes'; 'instances of writing in English outside the school context', 'the role played by reading'; 'the home background and the role played by the family'; 'outstanding personality traits in the learners'; 'learners' concept of "good writing"', and 'learner strategies and techniques'. The teachers' perceptions on 'outstanding qualities in the learners' were also considered.

Presentation of findings

As the exceptional Unathi was the most senior of the five learners studied, and as his case raises the most significant points, I shall put him at the centre of my discussion. In making some generalisations at the end, I shall draw on evidence from the other four research subjects to provide a richer description.

THE CASE OF UNATHI

In presenting Unathi, I shall outline the most striking characteristics which seem relevant to his exceptional success at learning to write in his second language.

1. *Unathi is excited by language and has a very positive attitude to English.* It is the subject he "loves the most" at school. In his opinion, for one to learn the language, "love of the language" is a very important ingredient. He is aware of the need to "speak", "listen", and "read" as well as write in English. He chooses to express himself in English throughout the interview. He sees no point in expressing himself in Xhosa, because it is his language already. He therefore has 'nothing to gain' by practising it. English is another matter. He gets 'used to speaking in the language', and in the process learns 'new vocabulary'.

The other successful learners in the study express similar sentiments. Unathi is alone, however, in having a vision of learning 'French' and 'German' one day. He is a member of a youth gospel group in his church. It is important to this group that they should 'get used to talking in English'. So, before they start with their singing, they hold a service, in which one of the members preaches in English, although they are all Xhosa -speaking. His white friend, Walter, converses with him in English whenever they are together, and at home Unathi uses the language to express himself. The addressee can respond in Xhosa: Unathi's concern is to 'develop' himself, not to make others speak English.

2. *Unathi takes every opportunity to read and listen to English.* As soon as his widowed mother finishes reading the *Sunday Times* which she buys every Sunday, he starts reading it. English is the language he feels most comfortable reading in. When he comes across an unfamiliar word, he notes it in his mind, and consults the Oxford dictionary that he keeps at home. His favourite television programmes are the soaps, 'The bold and the beautiful', and 'The days of our lives', and the 'Felicia Mabuza-Suttle' talk show. On the radio he tunes in to radio stations 'Metro' and 'Algoa'.
3. *Unathi loves writing.* He chooses to write in a range of genres. His portfolio bears testimony to this. On top of his schoolwork, he has written four of the seven short chapters of a book on how one can live a "sound and valuable life." And the practice of writing in English extends to telephone messages. The interview sparked his enthusiasm to try his hand at writing poetry. It is perhaps not surprising that he communicates happily in written English. In this he takes after his late father.
4. *Unathi is a self-directed writer.* When given a choice among several topics to write on, he chooses topics that are 'important' to him, topics that are on issues that he 'knows'; are 'alive'; 'about things which will be effective from now till eternity'. Examples of topics he prefers are how he feels about 'abortion' or 'how a president should be', because he knows that he 'will always feel the same' about these issues. He does not appreciate topics which tell the reader 'no, don't do this, do this' or topics on 'science fiction'. In his view writing should be in keeping with the English saying, that Shakespeare 'was not for an age but for all time'. Because of these factors, he claims never to write 'for the sake of writing an essay'. The essay he sees as the best of all that he has written is an autobiographical account entitled 'What I like about myself'. What comes across very strongly from this piece is his relaxed and uninhibited style of writing, and the confidence evident in his 'voice'. He chose the topic because he 'loves' himself in the sense of being resolved about who he is; he has said all that he wanted to say in the essay, and there hasn't been any need for him 'to consult any encyclopaedia, dictionary or anyone'.
5. *Unathi has a fairly highly developed sense of the craft of writing.* He illustrates the importance of the good teacher and of alertness to learning opportunities. His higher primary English teacher made a big contribution to developing his writing ability. Because of this teacher's influence on him, Unathi knows that in the introduction to an essay, one has to 'mention everything' that one is going to talk about. When writing, one also needs to develop a need in the 'reader' to wish to read further. According to this teacher, the conclusion to an essay must 'never leave the reader satisfied', instead the reader should be made to wish that there could still be 'more' to read. For Unathi to still remember a lesson that he had been taught at least five years

previously, suggests the extent of the impression that this English teacher made on him. The teacher gave him his independence as a learner

To become a good writer, Unathi believes that one has to have a positive attitude, believe in one's ability to write. Knowledge of English grammar, which one attains by 'reading', exposes one to a 'format of writing', which includes 'punctuation'. 'Listening to people talking in English', together with the help one gets from one's 'English teachers', helps one write well in the language. As time constraints do not allow for the brainstorming of ideas, Unathi thinks it best to 'jot' the ideas 'in the mind'. He claims 'to close' his eyes, 'think' about what he is going to write, to 'picture events' and 'memories' in his 'mind', and then to 'form' a story on what he is going to write. Although he thinks in terms of key 'words' while composing, where he should put 'is' or 'are' in the sentence 'just comes' to him.

An index of Unathi's sophistication as a writer is his conscious and persistent awareness of 'the reader' and the reader's needs. This 'reader-based' awareness which takes cognisance of reader needs is according to Leki (1995:9) and Flower and Hayes (in Murray and Johanson 1990:29) indicative of 'mature' and 'expert' writers respectively.

6. *Unathi's motivation to use language skilfully comes from his career vision.* His ambition in life is to become a 'psychologist' because he 'loves counseling' and is confident in his counseling ability. In his view counseling involves 'people who are hurt' and 'depressed'. One therefore needs to exercise care, to 'look at the situation' and also 'choose' 'what words can you say' or 'can't you say' when you talk. Because English is neither 'harsh' nor 'heavy', but rather 'pure and simple', Unathi sees it as having 'suitable words to advise or console' a patient. According to him, saying 'hello' to a person 'doesn't sound the same as saying "molo"', because 'molo' sounds a 'little bit heavier'. It would be interesting to see how Unathi handles the linguistic aspect of his practice as a psychologist, in view of the fact that the patients most likely to consult him are Xhosa-speaking.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Such stories are very suggestive to researchers, and several aspects will be followed up in other circumstances. In the research reported in my thesis and in this paper, I had five subjects, so it was possible to identify features common to five very different individuals at different levels of development. Drawing together the information on all five successful learners, I found three major factors dominant in all cases. Learning a second language and using it well in writing seems to be influenced strongly by the home context, the teacher's approach and attitude, and a cluster of affective issues.

- *The home context.* Benson and Heidish (in Belcher and Braine 1995:324) argue that writing begins 'well before the school years' and that 'ways in which young children approach writing are related to the language and literacy tasks to which they were exposed in their home and community environment'. This factor was very evident for my five successful learners. All but one of the five successful learners in my study come from literate home backgrounds of some kind or another. The exception is exposed only to whatever reading material she can borrow from friends, and to the monthly editions of

Ebony magazine which she is sufficiently motivated to buy out of her own pocket.

In the sixth grader's case, support ranges from 'educated' aunts who take an active interest in his school work, his father who regularly buys and reads the *Daily Dispatch*, and a teasing situation where the older members of the family use English to 'exclude' younger ones from certain parts of the conversation. As sources of information, siblings also have an important role to play. Since the loss of the dictionary at home, the seventh grader asks an elder sister to explain the meaning of words that she does not understand. An elder brother plays a similar role in the eighth grader's case. The eighth grader in turn is responsible for helping a younger sister make sense of her language homework. Three of the learners have English-speaking friends all of whom are native-speakers of English, with two of these friends white and the one black. Other than English-speaking friends and neighbours, in one learners' case there is a cross-racial marriage between his aunt and a white man.

- *The role of the English teacher.* A good ESL teacher can leave an indelible mark on the mind of the learner, as is evident in the case of Unathi's primary school English teacher. There is no doubt that a student who has positive feelings toward a particular teacher is bound to like the subject that the teacher in question teaches, thereby being motivated to do well in it. Also, according to Williams *et al.* (2001), the teacher who is more demanding and expects more out of the students, regardless of their age, develops their thinking ability, thereby improving their literacy levels.

Although not all the subjects are as vocal as Unathi about the role of their English teachers, it is apparent that dedicated English teachers can improve the ESL learning experiences of their students. When relating his English-language learning experiences, the eighth grader claims to have experienced some hardship with his grades five and six teacher, who never taught them in English except for grammar exercises, nor did he explain things to them. He however recalls how well his grade seven teacher taught them English, by 'explaining things' to them, among other things. In an essay on 'My English Teacher', the eleventh grader speaks of her teacher as 'a very wonderful, caring and inspiring lady' who not only taught them English 'only as a subject', but also taught them about the 'real facts of life'. One of the factors highlighted in this study is the fact that the ability to write well in ESL is a process - one that cannot be achieved over night. The teacher has to be patient with the process

- *The affective factor.* Naiman (1987:4) discusses the impact that affective variables may have on what and how ESL learners learn. My five successful learners exhibit a combination of the following affective characteristics:

They love English: listen to it, read a lot in it, converse and write in it.

They are confident, motivated and driven by ambition to have successful careers.

They have a go-getting attitude, are willing to take risks and be corrected.

They get a significant amount of their expertise in writing from exposure to the mass media.

They are adventurous, and willing to try out a wide range of strategies and techniques.

They are survivors who despite difficulties are bent on making it on their own, regardless of the situation they find themselves in both at home and at school.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHING TEACHERS

A study like the one on Unathi raises certain issues which researching teachers might want to take up. In order to produce more students of Unathi's calibre, it seems the school and the home have to work together. It would perhaps also be a good thing if access to the mass media could be expanded in schools from as early an age as possible. Researchers need to figure out ways in which they could secure the cooperation of parents by conscientising them about the role family members could play in children's' education. It is also clear that English teachers can carry a lot of influence, which could be used to the benefit of the ESL student. Looking into the possibility of developing those affective factors in ESL students which it is possible to inculcate, this being the task of both the family and the ESL teacher, might also be worthwhile.

POSTSCRIPT

The school, where Unathi and the others studied, is now being renovated. There will be more space, a library, and classrooms wired for electricity. Unathi is also on the move. He is due to graduate from university in December 2001. There are major compensations in teaching, and he has been one of them for me.

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