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'IT'S JUST THE LANGUAGE'

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Inadequacies in performance at school level are often explained away with the phrase 'it's just the language'. This article argues, however, that the level at which learners are able to use language appropriately and effectively will play a key role in determining whether the promises of Curriculum 2005 remain at the level of rhetoric or are indeed realised. The low success rate of black learners, in particular, is dramatically highlighted each year when the matriculation results are published.

In the main part of this article, the term literacy is explored to highlight some of the complexities and challenges of literacy development within an OBE context: languages must become rich resources. Next a critical view is taken of the argument that OBE means 'business as usual' for teachers using a communicative language teaching approach. Some of the dangers inherent in the rhetoric used to describe OBE are explored. In addition, constraints on the development of literacy, such as large classes, poor resources, conservative attitudes and the lack of parent support, are presented. Supporting data is drawn from a project in four primary schools, as well as from insights gained from teachers doing a distance-education course. In conclusion, the article argues for inclusive education that will explore ways to affirm diversity in meeting the challenge to enable learners to develop.

Ontoereikende prestasie op skoolvlak word dikwels afgemaak met die woorde 'dis net die taal'. Hierdie artikel is egter van mening dat die vlak waarop leerders in staat is om taal effektief en toepaslik te gebruik, 'n sleutelrol sal speel wanneer vasgestel moet word of die beloftes van Kurrikulum 2005 blote retoriek sal bly of inderdaad gerealiseer kan word. Die swak suksessyfers van veral swart leerders word jaarliks dramaties beklemtoon wanneer die matrikulasie-uitslae gepubliseer word.

In die hoofdeel van hierdie artikel word die term geletterdheid onder die vergrootglas geplaas om party van die kompleksiteite en uitdagings rondom geletterdheidsontwikkeling binne 'n UGO-konteks sterker na vore te bring: tale moet ryk hulpbronne word. Vervolgens word daar krities gekyk na die argument dat UGO sou beteken 'business as usual' wanneer onderwysers 'n kommunikatiewe taalonderrigbenadering volg. Party van die gevare wat inherent is aan die retoriek wat gebruik word om UGO te beskryf, word ondersoek. Beperkinge op geletterdheidsontwikkeling, soos byvoorbeeld groot klasse, ontoereikende hulpbronne, konserwatiewe houdings en die gebrek aan ouerbetrokkenheid word ook aangevoer. Data ter ondersteuning hiervan is verkry van 'n projek in vier laerskole, sowel as insette van onderwysers wat besig is met 'n afstandsonderwyskursus. Die artikel bepleit ten slotte inklusiewe opvoeding wat maniere sal ontwikkel om te verseker dat daar diversiteit sal wees in die poging om leerders in staat te stel om te ontwikkel.

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INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that the education system is not yet meeting the needs of the majority of learners in our country. The matriculation results each year are only one confirmation of this. At this point language (in particular English) is viewed as the major barrier to learning success. On the other hand - and this is really problematic - inadequacies in general competence are explained away as 'it's just the language' - we can't have it both ways. In this article, I argue that that the level at which learners are really empowered to use language appropriately and effectively for the particular processes of inquiry and interpretation that underlie constructive learning.

Considerable research has been done on the effects that inadequate command of language has on language success in SA. Carol MacDonald's work (cf MacDonald and Burroughs, 1991) is perhaps the best known. Her thesis is based on Cummin's view that a threshold must be reached in a first language before a learner is able to develop certain academic skills. There are other lines of research which present a different picture. Makoni (1996) argues that, in effect, all learners learn through a non-mother tongue. There are two aspects to this. In South Africa, it is difficult to apply the term standard language to the indigenous languages. Hence it may be more accurate to speak of Xhosas, for instance, rather than Xhosa. In a classroom where Xhosa is used as medium, it is quite likely, especially in township schools, to be very different from the 'Xhosa' which the children (i.e. those who are 'mother-tongue' speakers) speak at home. The second aspect is highlighted by Gee (1990) when he argues that all children have to make the transition from the primary discourses of their early home life to the secondary discourses of school life. Experience at home determines the discourses that are learnt before school. Shirley Brice Heath has certainly provided convincing research to show that middle-class children are at an advantage in that the discourses used at school are less removed from those that are used at home.

Whether or not the choice is for learning through the medium of English or the through the mother tongue, it seems that critical dialogue with text (mediated where necessary) as a means of developing the ability to interpret and take into account different perspectives. This suggests that reading in both a second and a first language is closely tied to particular language development. Thus second language reading skills seem to be more closely tied to second language proficiency than to first language proficiency. Studies such as those done by Brock (1997) and Raphael, Brock & Wallace (1997) have challenged the notion that the second-language learners necessarily depend on first language decoding skills. This is consistent with the work done by Ramirez (1998) in Southern California where high levels in two languages are simultaneously achieved. Here the 'secret' seems to lie in skilful teacher mediation and dynamic engagement with and through language which is embedded in rich and increasingly diverse contexts in which the expectation of high levels of competence is held out. It seems that all of the research described above has one thing in common: learners need to be able to use languages as rich resources.

In the main body of the article, I argue that a greater focus on literacy in the curriculum is necessary to enable learners to attain the levels of language required for success at school and throughout their lives. Since the term 'literacy' is open to a number of interpretations, in the next section, the particular view of literacy adduced in this article is defined against the descriptions in Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) policy documents. This is followed by a review of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), since an emphasis on literacy has methodological implications. As a natural part of such a review, terms such as 'facilitator', and

'learner-centred' are also critiqued. Finally, some of the constraints on literacy teaching are reviewed.

THE TERM LITERACY

Since the term 'literacy' is open to a number of interpretations, some discussion is necessary to establish the way in which the term is used in this argument. First we should look at the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) policy documents:

> Literacy: Initially 'literacy' was seen as a cognitive process that enables reading, writing, and numeracy.
>
> Literacies: Currently the term 'literacy' has expanded to include several kinds of literacies. 'Literacies' stresses the issue of access to the world and to knowledge through development of multiple capacities within all of us to make sense of our worlds through whatever means we have, not only texts and books.
>
> *Examples of kinds of literacies*:
>
> - Cultural literacy - Cultural, social and ideological values that shape our 'reading' of texts.
> - Critical literacy - The ability to respond critically to the intentions, contents and possible effects of messages and texts on the reader.
> - Visual literacy - The interpretation of images, signs, pictures and non-verbal (body) language etc.
> - Media literacy - The 'reading' of e.g. TV and film as cultural messages.
> - Computer literacy - The ability to use and access information from computers.
>
> (Department of Education, 1997: 25)

The positive aspect is that this view of literacy does move beyond the more traditional definition of literacy education as the development of reading and writing. However, the new definition is far from being as valuable as it might be. Some of it is vague: 'through whatever means we have', for instance. But the main problems with it are that it tends to simplify the process and is inconsistent in the roles that it allows. The definition of critical literacy, for example, does not acknowledge the ideological debates which relate to literacy. At a more obvious level, it leaves out of account the productive ability to use language to manipulate others, as well as the ability to identify the manipulative devices or strategies that are used by others so that the reader can avoid being taken in. On the whole, literacy is presented in rather static terms. I believe literacy can far more usefully be seen as a dynamic developmental process involving language, thought and increasingly complex social interaction.

There are a number of different ways in which literacy can be understood. At one end of the spectrum, literacy is seen as a **neutral process** in which reading and writing skills are developed in rich contexts which include listening and speaking, integrating all four skills. Learners are provided with sufficient support to develop increasing autonomy and competence in communicating through and about text both verbal and symbolic. Ideally, the learning environment may be described as a text rich context. At the other end of the

spectrum, literacy can be viewed as a **dynamic process directed by learners**: it opens up cognitive possibilities and serves already recognised as well as burgeoning needs. Here the sociocultural context in which learning takes place becomes important and the social identity of the learners, the teachers and the producers of material is significant. Members of a low socio-economic community are unlikely to find conversations that feature painstakingly polite traffic officers convincing. Heath (1983), Kress (1997) and Gee (1990, 1999) are among those who see connections between literacy and social process. In their view, literacy is not neutral. Through interaction with a group, the individual is involved in bigger contexts of values, intentions and meanings. These are closely related to identity. Depending on the transitions which are made or not made, individuals may therefore be termed insiders or outsiders in relation to secondary discourses.

The term 'new literacy' is generally used to reflect the recognition that competence involves many literacies. Willinsky (1990:8) makes the point economically:

> The new literacy consists of those strategies in the teaching of reading and writing which attempt to shift the control of literacy from the teacher to the student; literacy is promoted in such programs as a social process with language which can from the very beginning extend the students' range of meaning and connection.

Views of literacy have direct implications for assessment and thus for classroom practice. In a skills-based system, literacy is described in terms of performance at a certain level on a standardised test. In that view, literacy is a matter of training. It is not an empowering process undertaken by the learner, but consists of teacher-directed preparation and practice to meet externally generated 'standards'. This older view tends to equate proficiency with narrowly defined mastery. And I believe this view is still embedded in much discussion of OBE. Proponents of new literacy reject such an approach since it is likely to ignore social process. It also ignores what Bonnie Norton Peirce (1989) has termed 'investment' - learners must identify with the purpose at hand before there can be affective commitment to learning. As Giroux .(1989) has argued, children need to be engaged in opportunities to give meaning to the world, not to be on the receiving end of the transmission.

Although OBE policy documents in SA which relate to literacy do reflect a concern with process and lifelong learning, interests in conflict with a view of mastery, there is a strong emphasis on 'measurement' and an association between attainment and mastery. Without an awareness of the diversity and complexity of the processes involved in the envisaged empowerment, literacy development could be reduced to no more than the accrual of discrete modules, confining learners to a very limited and potentially disabling set of possibilities.

MYTHS SURROUNDING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative Language Teaching is the current orthodoxy in language teaching both in South Africa and in other parts of the world, as even the briefest review of teaching or applied linguistics journals will confirm. This is particularly so with regard to second language learners. In my discussions with fellow language-teacher educators, I have gained the impression that for those engaged in interactive communicative teaching, Curriculum 2005 is seen as presenting nothing new since 'we have always taught in an outcomes-based way'. The

reality is somewhat different. Perhaps another explanation is that most of us prefer changes not to affect our sense of security.
One of the dangers in the introduction of any new approach is that it can soon redefine itself in Animal Farm terms. CLT and OBE have both succumbed to this. Anything that appears to belong to 'before' is rejected as absolutely wrong and anything which is seen as part of the 'revolution' is unassailable. Early public debate cast any detractors in much the same light as the unpatriotic. Perhaps one of the ways in which we can retain a necessary critical reserve in adopting an OBE approach to literacy is by exploring some of the CLT rhetoric which has proved to be so persuasive - and has taken us off course. This will serve a second purpose of highlighting the ways in which CLT will have to be redefined to make it more consistent with an organic view of OBE thrust which fosters literacy rather than language skills.

Two tenets will be explored: 'focus on meaning rather than form' and the emphasis on 'fluency rather than accuracy'. Both of these tenets originally marked the sharp rejection, in the name of *meaning*, of the carefully graded or sequential exercises involving discrete items which were the staple of traditional approaches. In time they have become catch phrases. In an attempt to bring the issues into focus, Widdowson, (1998) points out that a structural approach to language teaching (*This is an apple. That is the door.*) does not, in fact, ignore meaning. It places a *strong* emphasis on semantic meaning. The problem about this kind of structural teaching is not that it ignores meaning in itself, but that it results in unrealistic use of language or, as he puts it, 'pragmatically meaningless' language. We do not normally use language to point out what is self-evident. This, incidentally, is what is wrong with the kind of basal reader whose word text replicates or duplicates what is there in the pictures already. Consider the unnaturalness of a text like this: (Picture: a red ball. Word text: 'This is a ball. The ball is red.'). In any language context, the shared or familiar knowledge is usually left unsaid - unless to relieve some kind of social awkwardness or carry out a social ritual. In the self-consciousness of the foyer of a concert hall during the interval, two slight acquaintances encountering one another might find themselves saying of the soloist: 'He really played well'. And two acquaintances meeting in the glorious sunshine might say, 'Lovely weather we are having.'

Another problem with the catchphrase 'focus on meaning rather than on form' is that is poses false oppositions. Are we to believe that form has no meaning? There is considerable difference in meaning between *She shall have danced all night* and *She should have danced all night* as illustrated in the cartoon below.

Similarly, the binary opposition of fluency and accuracy ignores their interconnectedness and presents language development as if it were static and as if the demands of all contexts were the same. Just as a preoccupation with accuracy can impede fluency and make conversation stumble, so a concern with fluency without regard to accuracy can make the speaker incomprehensible. Both are needed. How they relate to one another is what needs to be investigated.

Kumaravadivelu (1994) has proposed an approach which offers a way out of these dilemmas. He has coined the concept of macrostrategies which refers to the broad guidelines teachers can use to generate situation-based microstrategies. Examples of macrostrategies are: maximise learning opportunities, foster language awareness and facilitate negotiated interaction. In these terms, CLT would be seen as a general *approach* rather than the canonical and rather restrictive *method* it has tended to become:

> The classroom context serves as a learning community, and the purpose of any discourse enacted therein is a pedagogic one. So whatever pragmatic activity goes on has to lead to the internalisation of the language as a semantic resource. This is the objective of learning, and in this respect, the structuralists got it right. What they did not get right was the means of achieving the objective (Widdowson, 1998)

In South Africa the move to outcomes-based education is an attempt to obtain equity in the educational system. I would argue that 'learner participation in communicative events' (Savignon, 1990: 210), a key tenet of CLT, must remain central to such an endeavour. However, some directed attention to language use and usage is essential. In other words, what is required is an approach to grammar teaching informed by the most sophisticated CLT theory. Successful address to the needs of the learners cannot be achieved by a return to exercises which use discrete sentences to focus on specific language items and treat knowledge of these grammatical items as 'outcomes.' CLT grammar teaching of that kind is always contextualised. It is more complex and rigorously demanding precisely because it relates to the real world and because must develop an understanding both of what is appropriate for a situation and of how language helps to create a situation or context.

> Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to *fit* the situation or context in which we are communicating. But at the same time, how we speak or write *creates* that very situation or context. It seems, then, that we fit our language to a situation or context that our language, in turn, helped to create in the first place.
>
> Gee (1999: 11)

Although there is not a communicative grammar available for the whole of English, enough is available from a variety of fields such as conversation analysis, communicative competence research, interlanguage analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and critical discourse analysis to make it possible to detail the content of a CLT curriculum in a systematic and coherent way. There are two other useful contributions towards providing the teacher with practical resources: Svartvik and Leech (1995) and Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell (1995). The latter offer a sound theoretical framework of language competence in refining and extending the models of Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983). They identify five competences which jointly constitute communicative competence: discourse, strategic, sociocultural, linguistic and actional. All are informed by grammar. They have detailed the language areas

that fall under each one in order to give a fairly comprehensive checklist of language points as well as a content base for syllabus design. Other work which is useful is the work on a grammar of spoken English (McCarthy and Carter, 1995). Their work emphasises the role grammar can play in empowering learners. A greater consciousness of the choices available, will make it less likely that CLT will confuse appropriacy with the claims of middle-class sensibilities (cf Peirce, 1989 which highlights the possible dangers inherent in CLT).

OTHER TERMS WHICH REQUIRE REVIEW

In South Africa, as in other parts of the world, the role of the teacher has predominantly been presented as that of a facilitator. However, what should be a very demanding role is often reduced in common discourse to a 'nothing or not much to do' role as evidenced by the frequent references to teachers becoming 'mere' facilitators. It is crucial to the success of OBE that a more complex content be given to this term. Harmer (1994) provides a starting point in describing the teacher's role in terms of a continuum between 'controller' and 'facilitator'. This suggests that instruction, or the provision of structured input, for instance, be narrowly confined to a controller position. with other roles being enacted at other points on the continuum. In my view, however, the term requires bolder interpretation. Apart from the boredom for learners that would result from an undiluted diet of groupwork, it is important for the teacher to be fully used as a resource. The need to reject the notion that in the classroom the teacher is the source of all knowledge should not lead to the reactionary idea that the teacher must not be used as a source of information or be seen as an expert. Learners who use well-directed questions to access information from the teacher are not illustrating their dependence: they are functioning autonomously. Furthermore, learners should not be denied the advantages of having a teacher who is an effective transmitter of information or instructor or a good story-teller. Modelling is an important way of mediating competence. Any of the many possible roles a teacher can have could be the means of effective facilitation. What ultimately determines whether the activities could legitimately be described as facilitative or not in an OBE curriculum should be the extent to which the activities can be described as being directed towards learning outcomes. This is not difficult to determine. However, determining whether the activities are *learner-centred* is less easy.

Learner-centredness has become a buzz word, so it is particularly important to be clear about the implications of the concept before continuing this discussion. First, true learner-centredness is elusive. As Nunan (1988:. 177) points out, 'no curricula can claim to be truly learner-centred unless the learner's subjective needs and perceptions relating to the processes of learning are taken into account'. Learner-centred approaches do not exclude the teacher from playing a strong role, but they do require a significant shift in focus. Whereas teacher-centred approaches aim at directing the learners along a well signposted course, learner-centred approaches see the needs of the learner as paramount. The teacher's chief role is to ensure that the learner's needs are identified and that the necessary materials or activities or instructions (appropriately tailored to the specific requirements) are provided in a setting which creates a 'starring' role for the learner. In other words it places the onus on the teacher to create the optimal conditions for the learner to learn. The ideal learner may be described as an 'executive', who is able to make and carry out conscious decisions on the appropriate action and to monitor the action or future decisions in terms of what has been learnt, and then adjust his or her thinking or future actions accordingly (Carrell *et al.*, 1988). These decisions are based on both reflective and analytical thinking and influenced by feelings or attitudes,

and they require an inner locus of control. There are a number of attitudes which appear to play a key role in successful learning. A few of the most salient are outlined below:

In examining what learner-centred means, Nunan (1995) takes us from theory, which is always prone to rhetorical appropriation, and directs our attention to complex description in which learning is the paramount concern. He suggests that learner-centredness can be implemented at a number of different levels, and presents the continuum from relatively less learner-centred to relatively more learner-centred.

As we have seen the true nature of learner-centredness requires the learner to engage in a process of constructing meaning. If the learner can match potential meaning with what Williams and Snipper (1990: 13) describe as 'non-verbal mental models of experience through a process of hypothesis testing', the hypothesised meaning is seen as the actual meaning and text is comprehended. This depends both on the learner's being part of a discourse community where he or she can interactively discover shared meaning and on his or her choosing to do so. As I have already suggested, CLT can create the pedagogical framework to enable learners to do so, but it will have to undergo a degree of transformation.

THE CONSTRAINT OF THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

I have already described CLT as the orthodoxy. Teaching and learning problems relating to the development of literacy must, however, take account of the reality that **few teachers have adopted a communicative position**. It seems that in most schools (as in countries outside South Africa) little has changed in practice. The picture presented of classroom practice is merely notional. The reports most my students write each year reflecting on their experience in a range of schools attest to this. While there may be changes in the kinds of topics that are being covered and some new techniques may be incorporated, the consensus may be expressed in the words of one of the students: 'so little has changed since I was at school...'. My observation of practice in the four schools used in one of my projects, as well as the information gleaned from my distance education students, confirms that traditional approaches are still well entrenched.

In most schools in South Africa the conditions do not favour more dynamic approaches. While the average size of class has been reduced in black schools, large classes are not unusual. One of the teachers in a project school has 72 in the class, and classes in the 90s are not unknown in black schools (personal communication from members of my distance education class). If the primary schools I visited recently in the Transkei and Ciskei are typical, then the majority of classrooms are generally stark and poorly equipped. There are simply no books available for their learners to do extensive reading. Schools are certainly far from being the welcoming learning centres OBE rhetoric describes. Many teachers are underprepared and lack competence in English (cf Hofmeyr and Hall 1996). The most recent audit done of teacher education centres concludes that with few exceptions teacher preparation is inefficient and dismal barring a few pockets of excellence.

Perhaps the single most difficult challenge to overcome though is the lack of parent support which most of the teachers doing the distance education I teach experience, according to a recent survey I did during contact sessions.

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