SOLUTIONS TO ACADEMIC FAILURE: THE COGNITIVE AND CULTURAL REALITIES OF ENGLISH AS THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION AMONG BLACK LEARNERS

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In South Africa, black learners who are speakers of Bantu languages have to use a second language, namely English, as the medium of instruction from Std 3 onwards. The differences between English language-culture and Bantu languages-culture(s) have generated a host of problems (and pseudo-problems?), where the main problem is academic failure. Three solutions to academic failure are discussed in the light of cultural and cognitive factors in multicultural education:

1. *The use of the mother tongue as the exclusive medium of instruction*
2. *Critical Language Study (CLS) and People's English*
3. *The separation of high ability learners from limited ability learners in the teaching situation.*

It is emphasised that culture is closely connected to a symbolic system, and thus an understanding of cognitive processes in academic learning requires an understanding of culture, and vice versa. Ultimately, of primary importance in academic study are the cognitive underpinnings of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency ***(CALP)*** *developed in the first language.*

In Suid-Afrika word swart leerders wie se moedertaal een van die Afrika tale is, tans vanaf st. 3 in 'n tweede taal, naamlik Engels, onderrig. As gevolg van die verskille tussen die Engelse taalkultuur en die taalkulture van die Afrika tale het daar 'n groot aantal probleme (en pseudo-probleme?) ontstaan, waarvan akademiese mislukking die belangrikste is. Drie oplossings vir hierdie akademiese mislukking word bespreek aan die hand van kulturele en kognitiewe faktore in multikulturele onderwys:

1. *Die gebruik van die moedertaal as eksklusiewe medium van onderrig*
2. *"Critical Language Study" (CLS) en "People's English"*
3. *Die afsonderlike hantering van hoogsbegaafde én minder begaafde leerlinge.*

Dit moet beklemtoon word dat kultuur nouverwant is aan 'n simbolesisteem. Gevolglik is 'n begrip van die kognitiewe prosesse betrokke by akademiese leer 'n voorvereiste vir 'n begrip van

kultuur, en omgekeerd. Veral belangrik vir akademiese leer is die kognitiewe ondersteuning van die Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) wat in die eerste taal ontwikkel is.

1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, black learners who are speakers of Bantu[1] languages, have a second language, namely English, as the medium of instruction from Std 3 onwards. The differences between English language-culture and Bantu languages-culture(s) have generated a host of problems (and pseudo-problems?), the most important of which is academic failure. In order to accommodate the changes in South African classrooms (as well as new ways of talking about old problems), "second language teaching" is now called, in some circles, "teaching in multicultural settings".

In previous research (Gamaroff 1993, 1994), I dealt with the relationship between culture, intelligence, conceptual frameworks and academic ability. I emphasised that culture is closely connected to a symbolic system, where culture and cognition are closely interrelated (Thompson 1991). For Rohner (1984), who defines culture as a "system of symbolic meanings", the emphasis is not on social behaviour, but rather on how people *conceive* their behaviour. Meanings are created out of the interaction between linguistic forms and the minds (concepts) of language users (Lee 1922:27). These meanings are represented, or rather (to describe the role of language more accurately) *evoked* (Slobin 1982:131-132; see also Lee 1992:9) by the symbolic system (in this context, language) of a culture.

In this paper, I focus on the role of culture and cognition in academic failure through the lens of three familiar solutions to academic failure:

1. The mother tongue as the exclusive medium of instruction

2. Critical Language Study (CLS) and People's English

3. The separation of high ability learners from limited ability learners in the teaching situation.

The first solution argues that only the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction throughout schooling, because many learners do not have the linguistic analytical ability to learn a second language, especially if the second language is a non-cognate language. It is argued that the main problem in the learning of English as a second language and its use as a medium of instruction is not merely limitations in students' *linguistic* analytical ability to do an English language task, but limitations in ability to do *any analytical task.*

CLS emphasises language awareness as an instrument of power, and in so doing endeavours to increase the critical (i.e. analytical) ability required for academic study. People's English, which is a South African implementation of CLS, tries to improve the ability to perform "speech acts" such as arguing, persuading and resisting print where necessary. It is again argued (as in the case

of the previous solution) that the main problem is also limitations in students' analytical ability to do academic study.

The third solution to the problem of academic failure relates to the desirability of separating low ability from high ability learners in the English classroom as well as in the general academic context. The educational, psychological and political implications of such a separation are discussed.

It seems then that more consideration should be given to the cognitive underpinnings of language proficiency, where the latter involves far more than the learning of the "linguistic" system of a (first or second) language.

2. MULTICULTURALISM, ENGLISH AS THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION AND ACADEMIC FAILURE

A multicultural educational institution is one where there is close contact between at least two different cultures. If the cultures are fundamentally different from one another (i.e. if they are non-cognate), this contact often leads to conflict. The conflict increases when the one culture has to enculturate itself into a dominant culture as is the case in South Africa, where the onus is on traditional African culture to adapt itself to Western culture. In the educational context, cultural differences exist between learners (e.g. English speakers and "Bantu" speakers in the same classroom) and between learners and learning programmes (e.g. between African culture and Western culture). A major teaching problem is how to reconcile the needs of both English speakers and Bantu speakers - whether they occupy the same classroom or not - in terms of syllabus demands.

One of the major findings in the South African Committee of University Principals Report (HSRC 1981) was that limitations in English proficiency were the main cause of poor achievement among black learners. The Committee warned that unless this problem was tackled during the early years of schooling, black education faced a dismal future. And one of the preliminary findings of the (ongoing) "Programme for educationally disadvantaged pupils in South Africa" (Botha and Cilliers 1993) was that there are three major areas of concern in black schools in South Africa, namely, cognitive deprivation, language inadequacies and consequent scholastic backlogs. *disadvantaged pupils*, whether in the South African context or elsewhere, usually refer to those who have suffered educational, social, economic and political deprivation. Although these four kinds of deprivation often occur together, this is by no means always the case, because it is possible to be socially and economically advantaged, but still not have the much needed intellectual stimulation at home or at school.

Young (1987:164) makes the following observation with regard to the poor pass rate of Standard 10 pupils in the Department of Education and Training (the DET - now officially defunct - was the controlling body in South African black education until 1994, the year in which South Africa's first democratic elections were held):

> ... such inadequacy is often rooted in language incompetence, the causes of which cannot be found in the English subject classroom alone, but across the curriculum in every subject taught through English as a medium.

Thus, one of the main problems in the English-as-a-medium-of-instruction situation is perceived to be that low proficiency in English (language and culture) blocks the flow of information and the development of skills. However, I believe that the root of the problem lies deeper than limited English proficiency:

> At college level we would expect our students to have a working knowledge of what one could call high school first language skills - skills such as summarising, comparing ... There are growing numbers of students who cannot perform these skills. Some students say they have never practised these skills in their first language classes. This compounds the problem for the ESL (English Second Language) lecturer. The students are working in a second language (for some a foreign language) and they are also dealing with an unfamiliar skill (e.g. summarising) (Higgs 1990: 1).

Skills development involves a complex combination of information-processing strategies, sufficient exposure to the second language, linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the mother tongue, of other languages, and of the world (Bialystok 1978:71-75). Other important factors are social and psychological adjustment.

With regard to speakers of black languages, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that English is a non-cognate language, i.e. there are radical differences between the structure (grammar and vocabulary) of black languages and English (Mascher 1991) and probably also between the executive processes of Western culture and African culture. It is the executive processes (i.e. information processing strategies) that I shall concentrate on:

> Although it is possible that certain executive processes may be innate ... In most cases they are likely to arise through learning, whether formal or informal, and to become entrenched through culturally mediated habits of thinking. Executive processes then, which are essentially goal-directed strategies of approach in problem solving and thinking, are a major locus for cultural influences on cognitive development and performance. At least some, if not most executive processes may be culturally relative and hence not represented in all populations (Verster 1986:15).

Intellectual stimulation does not operate in a vacuum but is embedded in specific conceptual frameworks that are part of the symbolic system of a culture (Thompson 1991). It can be argued that in South Africa, there is little "cognitive proximity" between black culture and "Western" (i.e. international) culture, making it difficult to translate these disparate frameworks into each other. However, there are many who take a very different view. For example, Van Niekerk (1992:32) asks the following two rhetorical questions:

> Isn't the ease with which different cultures and languages seem to be conceivable and expressible in the other's conceptual framework remarkable? And does not that reveal something of a type of conceptual commonality or constant that is *ab initio* denied by social relativists?

According to Verster (1986:15) above, "some, if not most, executive processes may be culturally relative and hence not represented in all populations". (In this paper, Verster's "executive processes" are seen as a subclass of Van Niekerk's "conceptual frameworks".) For Wiredu (1992:331), on the other hand, who rejects the bio-intellectual variability of mankind, the "fundamental fact" is that "because of the biological unity of mankind, any human being can participate or imaginatively enter into any human life form, however initially strange". In contrast to the views expressed by Van Niekerk and Wiredu, Millar (1988:157) maintains that if the intention of courses in higher skills development (these higher skills I equate with Verster's "executive processes") is to help students acquire higher order intellectual skills, such courses would be in "pursuit of the impossible".

To sum up: Van Niekerk (1992) and Wiredu (1992) maintain that all cultures can adapt with ease to one another's conceptual frameworks; Verster (1986) maintains that many cultures find it difficult, but not impossible, to enter into one another's conceptual space; and Millar (1988) maintains that concepts can only be developed, not acquired, which places the emphasis on inherent ability.

Having provided the conceptual framework on which the discussion will be based, I now discuss some solutions to academic failure.

3. THE MOTHER TONGUE AS THE EXCLUSIVE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

Mascher's (1991:2) reason for the high failure rate among black learners is that "the medium of instruction from Std 3 onwards is a language which is non-cognate to the learner's first language". Mascher (1991:3) defines cognate languages as those which belong "to the same family of languages and so have a similar grammar and vocabulary because they share a common origin" (a common history and culture).

In addition to the difficulty of learning "through" (or "in") the non-cognate language, there is also the difficulty of learning the non-cognate language itself. Mascher maintains that the ability to learn a non-cognate second language in a tutored situation requires special linguistic gifts of an analytical nature. The extensive studies of Macdonald and her colleagues (1990a, 1990b) have clearly shown the problems encountered by children who from Std 3 onwards do not only have to learn English, but also have to learn their content subjects through the medium of English.

Mascher's (1991:4) solution is that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue throughout schooling, and that the formal teaching of a non-cognate language (as a content subject) should not begin until the child has attained a reasonable mastery of the mother tongue,

which under normal conditions occurs at the age of about 12 years. In this regard, Mascher (1991: 11) make the following proposal:

> It is necessary for people to be working on African languages so that excellent materials in the mother tongue, materials suited to the real needs of the children, can be developed, published and used in schools.

There are three difficulties with Mascher's solution: Firstly, the economic necessity of attaining a reasonable mastery of English as a medium of learning (i.e. the medium of instruction) may make it difficult for the child to develop the mother tongue to the degree that Mascher recommends. Secondly, Mascher overlooks the following fact: "People do not necessarily want to be educated in their first language if that language has no cachet in the broader political context" (Eastman 1990:3). Thirdly, and most importantly, Mascher (1991) makes a causal link between the lack of sufficient "linguistic analytical ability" (which he distinguishes from other intellectual abilities) and the high failure rate. I find this causal connection spurious, because, in my view, the main problem is not the lack of *linguistic* analytical ability, but the lack of a sufficient level of analytical ability to do *any* academic task, whether it be a linguistic or non-linguistic task.

Limitations in analytical ability have genetic and environmental causes. For example, one may be born with sufficient analytical potential but it may be insufficiently developed through the mother tongue (i.e. through the language the child knows best - the first language) in the *early years* of home-life and school. Another cause of limited academic ability may be insufficient exposure to the background knowledge required to tap into new knowledge at a later stage.

4 CRITICAL LANGUAGE STUDY (CLS)

In contemporary education and politics in South Africa, as well as in many other parts of the world, the social function of "language as power" (Fairclough 1989; see also Fairclough 1992) has taken precedence over all other functions of language, indeed, over all other issues related to language (teaching) as well. (Almost the whole of the August 1994 issue of the South African Journal of Philosophy is devoted to the function of language as power.) In this section, I shall concentrate on Fairclough's British experiences and then relate them to "People's English" (Peirce 1989) in South Africa. I also examine the views of Fairclough (1989) and Peirce (1989) that language in education should concentrate on the empowerment of the disadvantaged and the oppressed. (In South Africa, disadvantage and oppression have often gone together.)

Fairclough (1989:6-12) finds major limitations in all the main approaches to the study of language. For Fairclough linguistics is too "abstract"; sociolinguistics is too "positivist", i.e. it is too much like "natural science"; pragmatics is too "individualistic"; cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence are too unconcerned with the "social origins" of language; conversation analysis and discourse analysis operate in a "social vacuum".

Fairclough (1989:13) suggests that these inadequate approaches be replaced by "critical language study" (CLS), which is an educational methodology that endeavours to increase critical language awareness. "Language awareness" is concerned with a smorgasbord of specialities such as semantics, pragmatics, translation, creativity, deviant language (Mittins 1991); advertising, jargon, prejudice, censorship, doublespeak and gobbledegook (Eschholz et al. 1978). "Critical language awareness", on the other hand, may be regarded as an (intellectual) awareness of this awareness. Gattegno (1987:107; see also Stevick 1990:108) uses the term "awareness of awareness" in a more "affective" sense. In his system, the "quantum energy" of the (affective) self is the prime mover in learning.

Fairclough's three main influences are, firstly, theories on ideology[2], secondly, Foucault's (1982) theories on discourse and power, and thirdly, Habermas' (1984) "theory of communicative action". Fairclough incorporates these theories into CLS, which, he maintains, is not just another approach like the others that he rejects, but is an "alternative orientation to language study" (Fairclough 1989:13).

Fairclough (1989:3) maintains that "the teaching of language in schools has to a remarkable extent contrived to ignore its most decisive social functions". Language for Fairclough (1989:41) is "a form of social practice"; a "discourse", and central to discourse is power:

> The idea of 'power behind discourse' is that the whole social order of discourse is put together and held together as a hidden effect of power (Fairclough 1989:55).

One destructive manifestation of this power, according to Fairclough, is the gradual imposition of standard English in Britain, which he describes as a "long process of colonisation" (Fairclough 1989:56) brought about by capitalism. Standard English in Britain remains to this day a "class dialect", i.e. a capitalist dialect (Fairclough 1989:57). The "cultural capital" (1989:63) invested in this "class dialect" is the key to a good education, to a good job and thus to the good life. One example of this cultural capital is literacy. Those who do not have the ability to read and write effectively (in the traditional education system) often have lower social status, and therefore also lack the power to change their status.

The merit of CLS is that it critically examines the "commonsense" naturalisation of the meaning of words in order to reveal their disguised ideological character, i.e. CLS examines the unequal power relations manifested through the connotations attached to specific words. CLS hopes to unshackle the contents of discourse, and eventually to unshackle knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough 1989:105; see also Peirce 1989, for a similar view). One of the ways of developing critical language awareness is to examine the causes of communication breakdown and find means of repair. A second way is to expose people to texts (spoken and written) that they are likely to find alien, and to get them to examine these texts critically. A third way is to deliberately disturb commonsense notions through radical intervention (Fairclough 1989:106). An example of such intervention that Fairclough relates involved a student and an experimenter:

Student: *I had a flat tyre.*

Experimenter: *What do you mean you had a flat tyre?*

The reaction of the "stunned" student to the experimenter's question was the following "hostile" outburst: "*What do you mean 'What do you mean'? A flat tyre is a flat tyre.*"

Fairclough warns that such a technique that disturbs commonsense notions should be used cautiously, otherwise the student may think the experimenter is playing the fool, or even mentally ill! "Victims" of radical interventions do not need a radical divergence from common sense to believe that anyone practising CLS is mentally ill - some language researchers maintain that language itself is a mental illness and a lie, and thus an insurmountable barrier to self-expression (Groddeck 1977:249-250). For Groddeck, in effect, people in general cannot benefit from any language approach; whether a linguistic, a sociolinguistic, a pragmatic, a cognitive or even a radically new approach such as CLS. The reason for Groddeck's despair is that all people are, by definition, mentally ill, simply because they use language.

4.1 Critical language study in schools

Fairclough's description of how CLS should work in schools is dealt with in this section. I then examine (Section 4.2) "People's English" in South Africa and relate it to Fairclough's CLS approach, and later connect the issues dealt with to a discussion of the relationship between intelligence, BICS, CALP (Section 5) and the relationship between the BICS, CALP and the mother tongue/first language (Section 5. 1).

Fairclough (1989:236) maintains that language abilities involve more than skills or tools for performing clear, error-free tasks, and for this reason he rejects the "instrumental language" approach (1989:236) as clearly described in a comment made by Kenneth Baker. (The context here is the speech given in 1987 by the Minister of Education, Kenneth Baker, who was responsible for setting up the Kingman Committee that investigated the state of English in British schools.)

> ... I have been struck by a particular gap. Pupils need to know about the workings of the English language if they are to use it effectively. Most schools no longer teach old-fashioned grammar. But little has been put in its place. There is little common ground on teaching about the structure and workings of the language, about the way it is used to convey meaning and to achieve other effects. We need to equip teachers with a proper model of the language to help improve their teaching.

Fairclough (1989:237) maintains that such an approach to language teaching is "exclusively task-orientated" and is merely concerned with effective ways of conveying meaning. Whatever the nature of the "task", it seems that Fairclough would regard any task that is not based on the social (probably socialistic as well) foundations of CLS as limited in scope. Fairclough's aim is to educate - and not merely to train for a task - the disadvantaged sections of the population in the "emancipatory discourse" of "oppressed social groupings" (Fairclough 1989:239). Fairclough

summarises CLS: Successful language development depends upon bringing together pupils' "existing abilities and experiences, their growing critical awareness of language, and their growing capacity to engage in purposeful discourse" (Fairclough 1989:244). The teacher and the teaching programme play a crucial role in this regard, and there is no doubt that the potential of a pupil can be impaired by the academic inadequacies of a teacher or of a teaching programme.

4.2 People's English and critical language study

In the previous section I described CLS in Britain. I now relate CLS to its South African version, namely "People's English".

In order to cope in the working world, according to "People's English", one requires

> the ability to say and write what one means; to hear what is said and what is hidden; to defend one's point of view; to argue, to persuade, to negotiate; to create, to reflect, to invent; to explore relationships, personal, structural, political; to speak, read, and write with confidence; to make one's voice heard; to read print and resist it where necessary (Peirce 1989:411-412).

An adequate preparation for entrance into the working world requires not only the four communicative competences, namely, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences (Swain 1985), but also knowledge of the relationship between discourse and power. Much of the impetus behind the present restructuring of education in South Africa is the need to empower the disadvantaged through the development of critical consciousness that will contribute to the social reshaping of a child's world. Through the reshaping of discourse, the child becomes integrated into the texts he/she reads. Discourse is not merely concerned with texts or language forms, but also with giving prominence to the "socially constituted and socially constituting nature of discourse and language" (Fairclough 1989:238).

In English second language teaching, a useful distinction is made between:

1. English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which involves the learning of academic discourse (which is similar to Cummins' CALP). This would be the main concern of the *academic* domain in *education.*
2. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). This would be the main concern of the *non-academic* domain in *training.*
3. Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (Cummins' BICS). This would be a prerequisite for both education and training.

(I shall elaborate on the BICS-CALP distinction in the next section.)

In spite of the fact that People's English does not explicitly refer to EAP or BICS, I understand People's English to implicity embrace EAP, EOP and BICS. In all three of these subdivisions of language teaching, the concern of People's English would be to increase people's "proficiency in

such speech acts as defending a point of view; arguing, persuading, negotiating; creating, reflecting, inventing; exploring relationships, personal, structural, political; reading print and resisting it where necessary (Peirce 1989:411-412). However, People's English does not distinguish between EAP, EOP and BICS and consequently, some people might believe that People's English is able to empower them to perform all the above speech acts. In the academic context, which is the domain of CALP, there are many learners who are not able to persuade, argue, and resist print effectively, because they do not have the capacity to learn how to do it effectively. This capacity is closely related to *intelligence*.

5 INTELLIGENCE, BICS AND CALP

The everyday meaning of *intelligent* is clever, inventive, methodical, quick-witted. In more academic terms, an intelligent person is one who is able to perceive new order and new structure, and thus is able to combine things together in fresh ways, creating new abstract patterns and relationships such as identity and difference, cause and effect. Problem solving requires these abilities.

Cummins (1980, 1983, 1984) divides language proficiency into the two categories of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). This distinction is very important in any discussion of language proficiency in education. All healthy human beings *automatically* acquire BICS in their mother tongue, but not all human beings are capable of achieving the level of CALP that is required for academic study. In order to understand what is involved in academic performance, it is important to understand the role of intelligence in CALP and the consequent role of CALP in academic performance.

The crucial question is whether there is a *causal* connection between limited intelligence and limited CALP in the *second* language (namely, English). The immediate response by many would be: "Of course not!" Some would even maintain that there is no direct link between *first* language/mother tongue proficiency and intelligence either. In the following paragraphs, I try to explain the distinction between BICS and CALP in terms of the symbiotic relationship between *first* language development and intelligence.

Consider the following account from Richard Boydell (Fourcin 1975:263):

> Like every child, I was born without language. Unfortunately, I was also born with cerebral palsy, which, in my case, means that, although my intelligence is unimpaired, I have a very severe speech defect and no use in my hands and arms.

Chomsky's comment would likely be that to be "born without language" (Boydell above) means to be born without a specific (natural) language (e.g. English), but this does not mean that Boydell was born without the capacity (Chomsky's "Language Acquisition Device" - LAD) for learning a language.

6. BICS, CALP AND THE MOTHER TONGUE/FIRST LANGUAGE

In any discussion of the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement, one should distinguish between the following three notions: general language proficiency, BICS and CALP. "General language proficiency" does not take the BICS-CALP distinction into account. BICS does not require what I call *academic intelligence* (i.e. academic potential), but CALP certainly does. With regard to CALP, various authors (e.g. Collier 1987; Cummins 1979, 1980) maintain that if CALP has not been developed in early childhood and/or the early years of schooling through the mother tongue (or at least through the language the child knows best) - and this is Mascher's point as well (see Section 3) - many disadvantaged children will not succeed in an academic environment, where the medium of instruction is a second language like English, which is often regarded as an alien language (and culture).

One of the major problems of many learners who enter higher primary and lower secondary school, where a second language is the medium of academic instruction, is that they have gained neither the necessary knowledge nor developed the necessary skills in their mother tongue to learn anything academic - whether it be (CALP in) a *second language* or some other subject. The fact is that second language CALP cannot be separated from first language CALP, nor can either of these be separated from proficiency in the "content" subjects, e.g. integrated studies.

In order to attain CALP in a first language, e.g. Chinese, one must first know BICS in Chinese. However, if a Chinese speaker wants to develop CALP in a second language, e.g. English (ESL), it is not a prerequisite to develop BICS in ESL, because the attainment of a reasonable standard of BICS in ESL only occurs - in some cases it never occurs - after the attainment of a reasonable standard of CALP in ESL (as I have experienced with Chinese immigrants in my community). In these circumstances, CALP in a second language is developed mostly through the modes of reading and writing.

The crux of the matter is that many Chinese, in contrast to the disadvantaged people of South Africa (mostly black people), have had the opportunity to learn CALP in their mother tongue. In South Africa, many non-mother tongue speakers of English are obliged to learn BICS in English in order to gain a foothold on CALP in English, because they haven't developed an adequate level of CALP in their mother tongue to enable them to move (relatively) smoothly into CALP in English. Thus, one of the problems in South African education is that disadvantaged learners have not learnt an adequate level of CALP in their mother tongue, and consequently are obliged to learn CALP in English. To add to their plight, they have to learn BICS in English and CALP in English *both at the same time*. Furthermore, a high level of BICS in a particular language (whether the mother tongue or another language) does not necessarily lead to a high level of CALP in the same language.

7 THE LIBERATION OF COGNITIVE POTENTIAL

In the context of South African education, the motivation to cooperate with - if not integrate into - a Western academic system will often increase when meaningful learning takes place. Thus, I regard the principal education issue not to be liberation (albeit an important issue) from the "class dialect" of formal English, as Fairclough (1989:63) maintains, but rather that more attention should be given to the fact that much of academic discourse is often incomprehensible (not only in a second language, but also in the first language) to learners with limited CALP. Without this ability, many children will not be able to develop much of what language teaching approaches, such as "People's English" (Peirce 1989) or "discourse as social practice" (Fairclough 1989), have to offer. Accordingly, one should view with caution all teaching programmes such as People's English or programmes in a similar vein, that make, in my view, outlandish claims about raising the cognitive levels of people. For example, a course is being developed at the University of the Western Cape (Volbrecht 1992) called "English for Educational Development", which seems to share the same aims as People's English. The course has liberation as its "thematic core" where the

> 'six sites of emancipation' [non-sexist, non-racist, democratic, etc.] are continually explored through extensive reading, writing and discussion which is a *powerful* aid to the cognitive development of students. [my square brackets and italics.] (Volbrecht 1992:57).

Liberation, for many justifiable reasons, has been a major concern in South African education. Therefore the English for Educational Development course (Volbrecht 1992) and People's English (Peirce 1989) have a positive role to play in encouraging and educating as many people as possible to be able to argue, persuade, resist print where necessary, and the like. However, it has yet to be shown that the intense political sensitising that resides at the core of an English for Educational Development course and People's English leads to the necessary cognitive development.

Ironically, People's English (i.e. for the "people"), and similar programmes, can only be so in intention (and in this regard it is commendable), because one might have to exclude from People's English the majority of people such as artisans, agricultural workers, and many other kinds of workers. This exclusion from People's English would not only pertain to the informal sector, but also to the formal sector, because many in the formal sector - whether L1 or L2 speakers - would not do extensive reading, writing and discussion to benefit significantly from People's English. And the reason, I suggest, that they would not do it is not because they do not want to do it, but because they lack the ability to do it.

8 THE SEPARATION OF HIGH ABILITY LEARNERS FROM LIMITED ABILITY LEARNERS IN THE TEACHING SITUATION

In spite of the fact that the separate South African education systems of the past ("black", "white", "Indian" and "coloured" systems) have been officially unified into one education system, it might still be educationally desirable to separate high ability pupils from limited

ability pupils in the teaching situation. The relevant contexts are firstly, the teaching of ESL, and secondly, the teaching of the other academic subjects.

The *subject* English (not only for second language users, but also for mother tongue speakers) should be, in my view, the most important subject in the curriculum, where the emphasis should not only be on literature, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on EAP. The question is whether pupils with limited English proficiency and high English proficiency should be, or could be, taught EAP in the same classroom.

In the new educational dispensation, it might be educationally desirable to have two separate English departments (LI and L2) in schools. (I am specifically concerned with urban schools, because most rural schools will remain "black" in a future South Africa. About two-thirds of the schools in South Africa are in rural areas.)

Such a separation was implemented at Mmabatho High School (in the North West Province) in 1990 (Barkhuizen 1991). The argument for this kind of separation at Mmabatho High School was that the English classroom consisted of pupils with a wide range of English proficiency, which made learning/teaching conditions very difficult. It is not only in the English classroom that problems will arise, however, because the subject English is only one of several subjects in the school curriculum that require English proficiency, specifically CALP. It is going to be very difficult for both learners and teachers to cope in a classroom where there are pupils with a wide range of academic ability, many of whom would have limited ability. Wakely (1993:9) describes the situation as he experiences it:

> While it cannot be denied that it is possible in a class of mixed ability for some of the weaker, 'surface approach' candidates to move from 'answer seeking' to 'knowledge-seeking' ... and to improve their performance, this is largely dependent on there being a sufficient number of able and *willing* students to carry the course along. Once the number of academically weak students reaches a certain level (probably about 40% of the total), the likelihood of a marked decline in the performance of virtually all the members of the class is greatly increased.

The problem described above might be solved by separating limited ability learners from high ability learners, if it were permitted in the present political dispensation. However, besides the political factor, there is another, perhaps more important, factor that may militate against separate classes. The composition of the South African population is going to be reflected in the classroom of the future, where the majority of pupils are going to be second language users of English, with limited English proficiency and limited academic ability, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. If pupils were separated in order to avoid the problems that Barkhuizen and Wakely have experienced, it could mean that one classroom would contain, for example, 50 L2 pupils and another, only 10 Ll pupils. This would not be socially, financially, or *psychologically* justifiable. One of the possible psychological effects would be that pupils might feel that there is a stigma attached to the L2 label.

The reason why Mmabatho High School was able to have separate L1 and L2 departments is that it admitted an equal number of advantaged (mostly L1) and disadvantaged (mostly L2) pupils. However, in the future, I do not think that Mmabatho High School will be able to do this. What will probably happen is that the proportion of disadvantaged pupils will gradually increase, which will make it difficult to justify the expenditure on a separate, relatively small L1 classroom.

Barkhuizen (1992:51) has suggested an alternative to separate English departments, namely, the "multicultural approach". This second approach, which was probably conceived in the light of the changes that I have mentioned in the previous paragraph, involves adapting methodologies and materials to accommodate varieties and differences in "cultural heritage", especially in the same classroom. One of the difficulties that would probably arise in such an approach is finding (and quickly enough) the appreciable number of qualified people who have sufficient expertise in curriculum development, as well as sufficient time to make the necessary changes. This task is the responsibility of the syllabus designer, and not of the teacher. (In the Eastern Cape of South Africa, there are plans to provide teachers with more training in syllabus design.)

9 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper discussed three solutions to academic failure:

1. The first solution proposes that the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction throughout schooling, because many learners do not have the linguistic analytical ability to learn a second language, especially if the second language is a non-cognate language. I have argued that the main problem is not the lack of *linguistic* analytical ability, but the lack of a sufficient level of analytical ability to do *any academic task.*

2. Critical Language Study upsets commonsense notions and tries to increase the students'awareness of language as an instrument of power. CLS would regard any task that is not based on social foundations as limited in scope. People's English, which is a South African implementation of CLS, endeavours to encourage and educate as many people as possible to be able to become socially active in such acts as arguing, persuading,or resisting print where necessary. I argue that the ability to perform these specific speech acts is dependent on Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

3. The last solution considers the desirability of separating low ability from high ability learners in the English classroom, as well as in the general academic context. Various implications of such a solution were dealt with, such as the financial, political and psychological implications. In the light of these implications, it was suggested that the separation of limited ability learners from "high" ability learners would not be a feasible solution.

In my view, there are three main considerations in attempting to find solutions to academic failure. Firstly, learners may not have the inherent ability to achieve success in an academically demanding environment. Secondly, they may have the inherent ability, but it may remain underdeveloped or may even be incapacitated by social, economic and educational (e.g. an incompetent teacher) factors. A clear indication of this poorly developed capacity is the underdevelopment of CALP, whether learnt through the mother tongue/first language or the second language.

Thirdly, one should also be sensitive to the upheavals that may result from trying to impose a "Western" English/American cultural system on the black populations of South Africa. For example, one of the puzzles encountered by English mother tongue (usually white) teachers (of ESL and other academic subjects) is the general bewilderment rather than resistance of black learners when confronted by the cultural demands of white society. What may be of central concern to these learners is not cognitive growth, reasoning, or logic, but rather the social adjustments needed to cope with learning a different language-culture (Cazden, John & Hymes 1985:xxxi; this is also one of the main points in Fairclough 1989).

Feelings and emotions play a determining role in the learning process. Accordingly, feelings of cultural *anomie* (estrangement) should not be ignored in attempts to develop cognitive programmes, whether these programmes receive their inspiration from psycholinguistics (e.g. Cummins' CALP) or sociolinguistics (e.g. Peirce's People's English and Fairclough's "language as empowerment"). I think while it is correct to say that some individuals, no matter what culture they belong to - *providing bio-cultural and social conditions are right* - are able to enter into and feel at home in another culture, but there are many who see academic culture as (radically?) different from their own, and consequently are not able to adjust to it and certainly not able to feel at home in it.

The ultimate socio-economic and political question is how to enculturate black learners into a Western educational system in a peaceful and just way. The hard choice - and hard truth - for many black people in South Africa is either to learn how to exchange information in a "foreign" language-culture (the better this is done, the brighter the economic prospects) or remain on the fringe of economic opportunity.

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[1] The word "Bantu" is used as a linguistic term to refer to the black languages of South Africa. The term "black" (languages and cultures) and "Bantu" (languages/cultures) are used interchangeably in this paper. The term "Bantu" in South African politics had a perjorative meaning for South African black people. But that is no reason for it to be discarded in linguistics.

[2] Ideology is a difficult concept to define. What I mean by ideology here is a wilful distortion of reality that serves relations of domination (Mouton 1994: 188; see also Thompson 1991). Thus common sense or surrender could personify itself as a dictator with a will of its own; the will to rule other people's lives (or one's own). Gee (1990: 23) defines ideology as a social theory which involves "generalizations (beliefs, claims) about the way(s) in which 'goods' are distributed in society." The "relations of domination" (in the first definition) often determine the "way(s) in which 'goods' are distributed in society" (Gee's definition).