

LEARNER PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN AFRICAN HIGH SCHOOLS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE POLICY

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ABSTRACT

Are the most suitable teachers of a second language necessarily mother-tongue speakers of that language? From a survey of responses of std 8, 9 and 10 African pupils of English as a second language, it would seem that teachers of English who are not mother-tongue speakers are automatically regarded as inferior. In this article, the author considers the validity of 'South African English', and the role and relevance of indigenous languages in education in a post-apartheid era. He uses data gained from his pilot study to elucidate issues such as the role of English in education in a multi-lingual context and particularly the need for in-service training and improved initial training of language teachers in South Africa.

Is die mees geskikte tweede taal-onderwysers noodwendig moedertaalsprekers van daardie taal? Uit 'n oorsig van response van standerd agt, nege en tien swart tweede taal Engels-leerlinge, blyk dit asof Engelsonderwysers wat nie moedertaalsprekers is nie outomaties as minderwaardig beskou word. In hierdie artikel ondersoek die skrywer die geldigheid van "Suid-Afrikaanse Engels" en die rol en relevansie van inheemse tale in die onderwys in 'n post-apartheid tydperk. Hy gebruik data uit sy loodsstudie om sake soos die rol van Engels in onderwys in 'n veeltalige konteks toe te lig en veral die behoefte aan in-diensopleiding en verbeterde aanvanklike opleiding van taalonderwysers in Suid-Afrika.

INTRODUCTION

In all probability multilingualism will be adopted as the official language policy of post-apartheid South Africa (Language Project Review, 1990:13). This will not only regularise the status of African languages vis-à-vis English and Afrikaans, but will also foster active debate on language issues that up till now have been taken as axiomatic. There are many issues surrounding the use of English and, accordingly, the teaching of English in African secondary schools in the new South Africa. These issues include:

- (i) the "inflated claims about the English language" (Phillipson, 1992) in the "learning of anything" (Talbot, 1987), and the negative impact of such claims on the linguistic viability of indigenous languages (Abbott, 1992);
- (ii) "the relation between the English that is now a world language and the English that is a mother tongue" (Abbott, 1981; Close, 1981; William, 1983) that has given rise to the concept "English languages" (MacArthur, 1987) or "Englishes" (George, 1981; Abbott, 1981);
- (iii) whether the ability to speak English as mother tongue should be equated with the ability to teach it to speakers of other languages (Clayton, 1990);
- (iv) whether access to English will necessarily mean "economic and political empowerment" (Baron, 1989), or, in other words, whether English education will effect equality and thereby pave the way to democracy (**Language Project Review**, 1992:2; Amuzu, 1993);
- (v) whether English will retain its pivotal position indefinitely in a post-apartheid South Africa (**Language Project Review**, 1991:27) or whether it will change in

status and role in response to the establishment of a new national culture along with changes in language attitudes. (Aitken, 1987)

2 DESCRIPTION OF LEARNERS AND QUESTIONS

This article focuses on perceptions of problems with English language teaching and learning from the point of view of secondary school students in African schools. In a pilot study, three groups of students were asked why English classes were not as successful as they could be. The groups consisted of 55 standard 8, 50 standard 9 and 56 standard 10 learners, both male and female, between the ages of 16 and 20. Their answers were analysed and observations were made. The observations can be taken as representative of those groups. Experience suggests they may be true for other students as well. These observations can, in any event, be valuable as hypotheses for further study.

3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF STUDENT RESPONSES

According to the analysis of responses, two related factors are perceived as bearing most negatively on the quality of English language teaching and learning in African high schools. These are

- (a) teacher competence and professionalism (or work ethic); and
- (b) status and role of African languages in the English classroom.

3.1 Learner perceptions of teacher competence and professionalism

Learners in Std 8 seem to equate teacher competence and professionalism or positive work ethic with white teachers. Successful English language teaching in African schools is perceived as contingent on white teachers. 35 out of 55 standard 8 respondents (or 63,6%) expressed this view. The following verbatim examples illustrate the point:

- (a) "Because we didn't have an English teacher which is a white person who knows English correctly and because black one we did not unsure on them. We want a white person who come from the other country."
- (b) "1st Because we do not have the white people at our school."
- (c) "The main fact is that here in rural areas we have no white teachers who will teach us."
- (d) "My problem is that they don't have a white person near by."

Although there are other possible inter-relations, this perception could well be a product of apartheid policies in education which have institutionalised the equation: white equals first class and black equals second class in terms of English second language material and teacher competence. An extension of this perception is, as the above responses seem to suggest, evidence of an unconscious desire to seek "salvation" in whitemanness. This is related to the creation or reinforcement of a dependency syndrome (often misplaced dependency) which makes many Africans equate quality education in general with white teachers.

The length to which certain African parents would go to secure placement for their children in prestige white English medium private schools is possible evidence of this perception.

Students in the higher standards of the secondary school, however, seem to ascribe under-achievement in English language teaching and learning more to professional

limitations than to the race or nationality of the teacher. 30 out of 50 standard 9 respondents (or 60%) and 32 out of 56 standard 10 respondents (or 57%) listed teacher-related problems as contributing factors to under-achievement in English in African high schools, but none mentioned race or nationality.

The following verbatim examples taken from standards 9 and 10 respondents seem to illustrate this finding:

- (a) "Because we didn't receive good English teachers from our lower classes. So it is difficult to understand English in our matriculation classes. Even in Matric we are not good in talking and writing English."
- (b) "The problem lies where the teacher always assume that we know our work instead of teaching us."
- (c) "In any case, the problem lies with our teacher. She is never in class. Whenever she do come she speaks what is irrelevant."
- (d) "... some of them (teachers of English) now concentrate on their studies and neglect us as they want pass many degrees to earn more money."

Response (a) ascribes under-achievement to **professional and academic inadequacies** on the part of teachers at pre-secondary school level. Providing sufficient numbers of adequately qualified teachers to keep pace with the growth in school population appears problematic throughout the developing world, as it is linked with the overall standard of development of people.

Response (b) ascribes under-achievement specifically to a **limitation in the training** of African teachers of English. It seems that many African teachers of English are unable to assess accurately learner needs in the ESL classroom, with the result that they often plan and present lessons on incorrect assumptions, e.g. that learners possess language skills they have yet to learn. Barnes (1981) addresses this problem of teachers' awareness of learners' language competence and needs in content subjects in his "Language in the Secondary Classroom".

Response (c) ascribes under-achievement to the **work ethic** on the part of the teacher. It would appear that some teachers simply stay away from class or if they do turn up at all, they are either unprepared or ill-prepared. The teacher's attitude is so unprofessional that to all intents and purposes she is not only unhelpful to the learner in the English classroom, but has a deleterious effect on the teaching profession.

Response (d) indicates that some pupils see their teachers as striving to improve their academic qualifications at the expense of their students, with a resultant drop in the quality of English lessons.

Responses (a) to (d) from Std. 9-10 pupils in this sample seem to suggest that, at a certain level of education, mother tongue-ness as a variable in English language teaching and learning is marginalised in favour of teacher-competence and professionalism or the teachers' work ethic. If this interpretation is correct, successful English language teaching and learning in the New South Africa must be sought more in the province of teacher-competence and higher ethical values and less in the area of mother tongue English-speaking teachers. In fact, Galloway (1989) notes that Africa is gradually moving towards a greater reliance on, and even preference for African ELT teachers and is utilising expatriate Britons only in the **training** of such teachers.

In addition to the above indications of unprofessional practices on the part of certain ELT teachers in African schools in South Africa, a great many respondents expressed themselves strongly on other factors which they believe influence their achievement in

English. These include severe corporal punishment, frequent use of harsh language by the teacher, the teacher's tendency to ill-temperedness or anger where patience would be more appropriate, and sheer unkindness or lack of sympathy on the part of the teacher. The following verbatim student responses illustrate the above:

- (a) "we students are punished severely"
- (b) "we are afraid of the teacher"
- (c) "... our English teacher is very harsh to the students. That is why we are lazy to learn English"
- (d) "Because some teachers are short tempered..."
- (e) "Again, when we ask the teacher what we do not understand, the teacher make him or her (the learner) humiliated. So that is the main problem."

If these responses are, generally speaking, characteristic of African high schools in South Africa, then clearly there is an urgent need for two things. First, African teacher education should be re-assessed in terms of its underlying didactic principles, especially as regards the teacher-learner relationship in second language teaching and learning. Secondly, teacher upgrading programmes geared specifically towards the role of affective variables in second language pedagogy should be launched as a matter of urgency. It is possible that many teachers of English act unprofessionally in an attempt to achieve discipline or to re-assert teacher authority in the English classroom. However, the above sample of learner responses clearly suggests that chastisement, harsh language, uncontrolled temper and the like do not achieve the desired goals of order, discipline and respect of teacher authority in the English classroom.

The possible detrimental effect of this kind of teacher behaviour on students in African high schools is further shown by the following response from a standard 8 pupil:

"When we try to speak English the teachers laugh at us and this makes us not to learn English. And they even talk deep English so that to confuse us."

3.2 Learner perceptions of the status and role of African languages in the English classroom

Harbord (1992) observed that "the idea of avoiding the mother tongue in language teaching dates from the turn of the century with the appearance of the direct method". This observation is particularly appropriate to English language teaching in African schools. Both teachers and learners perceive the use of African languages (for whatever purposes) in the English classroom as evidence of inadequacy in both English language proficiency per se and in English second language pedagogy. This perception may stem mainly from at least two sources: the tremendous impact of the direct method (especially in opposition to the grammar translation method), and the fact that the much-hated Bantu Education Act of 1953 emphasised the use of the mother tongue in African education. Africans perceived this stipulation in the legislature as a deliberate way of eliminating African education from the mainstream of white education in order to lower its standard and so perpetuate apartheid through African disempowerment in education.

Perhaps it is partly for this reason that respondents in this investigation generally expressed themselves strongly against the use of African languages in and outside the English classroom. The following unedited examples illustrate the point:

- (a) Examples from standard 8 respondents:
- (i) "The main problem for them when we school out they speak only Shangaan they use Tsonga at home, at school, everywhere that is their problem..."
 - (ii) "Because teachers does not use English to teach the pupils some use mother tongue. Then that opinion decrease expulsion with English."
 - (iii) "The teachers we have qualified but always makes mistakes of teaching us in black language."
 - (iv) "I think if we have white teacher we can improve our English very well because white teacher is always speak in English. If we teach by a black teacher he always mix English with vernacular and by doing so even us we can't speak English clearly."
- (b) Examples from standard 9-10 respondents:
- (i) "Our black teachers for English when they teach often they break into the vernacular. They pronounce words to vernacular that is bad."
 - (ii) "Teachers must adopt the method of not allowing students to give opinions in their mother tongue, even if they find it difficult to put it in the Queen's language they should let them try."
 - (iii) "Principals should also not allow students" to communicate in their Home language while they are at school."
 - (iv) "In our schools teachers must try to be strick to the students to speak English anytime during school hours."
 - (v) "Because the white ones (teachers) knows English very well and we are going to speak English every time when he talk to us. Because black ones (teachers) when they talked to us they mix with vernacular and this language makes us to break English."

It remains to be seen how this perception of the status and role of African languages in the English classroom in African high schools is going to influence or be influenced by the policy of multilingualism as suggested by the ANC in its draft policy document (1992).

According to this suggested national language policy (i.e. of multilingualism), African languages will not only be developed, elaborated and maximally codified vis-à-vis English (and Afrikaans) and given the status of official languages (albeit effectively only at regional level), but will also play a more prominent role in teaching and learning. The policy seeks to redress disparities related to language and concomitant disempowerment of Africans in various areas of life including meaningful and effective education, earning power and other work-related issues. This includes access to legal procedures in the courts of law, as well as social and health services, all areas of life where Africans have to function in and through the current official languages (English or Afrikaans).

Some language educationists consider that the use of the mother tongue is not as militating a variable in the ELT classroom as it is often perceived to be (Medgyes, 1992; Harbord, 1992). Cummins (1980) maintains that "... instruction through the minority language (i.e. mother tongue) has been effective in promoting proficiency in both languages... (research) findings support the interdependence hypothesis..." Under normal circumstances, therefore, Africans in South Africa should not have problems with the envisaged national language policy which will effectively raise the status and role of

African languages vis-à-vis English (and Afrikaans) in the English classroom in particular and in African education in general. However, the socio-political history of South Africa has so bedevilled language matters over the last 300 years or so that most Africans (including the intelligentsia and the socio-economic elite) will need some persuasion to believe that African languages can in fact be facilitatory in the ELT classroom in particular and to African education in general. What the country's socio-political history has done is to create an unusual (if not tricky) situation in which a people argue **against** rather than **for** the centrality of their mother-tongue(s) in the language-related power game (including language in education).

Precisely how the African leadership in the New South Africa will address language empowerment through the national language policy of multilingualism remains to be seen.

The poet Wally Serote vividly presents the dilemma of many black people in his "Black Bells" (quoted by Adendorff, 1992) when he speaks of feeling "trapped" in the white man's ("whitey") language (English) and struggling to free himself from its powerful control and influence. The poet writes:

"I know I am trapped

Helpless

Hopeless

You have trapped me whitey!"

Kashoki (1993) sums up the advantages of multilingualism:

"Multilingualism should be regarded not as a problem but rather as a rich national resource."

He advises that:

"African peoples should be liberated from undue reliance on non-indigenous languages as the dominant official languages".

He adds that:

"The notion that African languages, by some conspiracy of nature, are innately incapable of modernization should be resisted."

In the meantime, African learners at high school level (as this investigation seems to suggest) see African languages as a hindrance in the ELT classroom (and probably in education in general).

Man is made in the image of God, but he cries when he is born. If South Africa cries linguistically when she is born, language educationists should understand why.

4. CONCLUSION

This pilot study should be seen as a contribution towards a debate on language issues, now and in the New South Africa. The adoption of multilingualism will necessitate the careful exploration of many other issues in the future.

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