

‘THERE’S A HIPPO ON MY STOEP’: CONSTRUCTIONS OF ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNERS IN THE NEW NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE

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The focus of this paper is an analysis of the conceptualisation of language teaching and the construction of learners in the new National Senior Certificate grade 12 curriculum and examinations taken by students for whom English is an additional language. The paper examines the values, attitudes and beliefs, as well as the required levels of cognitive engagement and notions of reading and writing. The authors argue that the curriculum represents a significant improvement on the previous version. However, there is a considerable mismatch between the Curriculum Statement and the examination papers. The curriculum emphasis on the role of language as a tool for critical, independent thinking is not evident in the examination papers, which reinforce traditional gender norms and essentialised notions of Africa. The examination papers are cognitively undemanding, requiring only the most basic understandings of texts. The authors argue that, by making it possible to pass at a very basic level, the examination system in effect obscures the contradiction that although the majority of learners have to use English as a first language across the curriculum, the language itself is taught as a second language.

Keywords

Second language teaching, English, national senior certificate

INTRODUCTION

In October 2008, South African grade twelve learners wrote the National Senior Certificate (NSC) for the first time. Important to note is that this cohort has grown up and been educated in a ‘new’ South Africa under one educational system, using a curriculum based on the principles of Outcomes Based Education (OBE). This curriculum was conceived as a decisive move away from Apartheid traditions of uncritical, decontextualised, content-laden curricula, as well as forms of assessment which encourage rote learning and uncritical reproduction. At its inception, the Department of Education (DOE) claimed that the new NSC posed a greater cognitive challenge than Apartheid-era curricula and represented a more modern and relevant content (Ndhlovu *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, as a result of poor performance at all levels of education, there has been public outcry about the failure of OBE and, subsequently, the Minister of Basic Education has announced that the current curriculum will be ‘repackaged’ and that a new educational plan will be released shortly (Department of Basic Education, 2010: 2).

In this context of rapid curriculum change, it is important to analyse both the strengths and weaknesses of the current curriculum and its modes of assessment. The focus of this paper is an analysis of the conceptualization of language, language teaching and the construction of learners in the NSC curriculum and examinations taken by students for whom English is a First Additional Language.¹ These learners constitute the majority of matriculants; of the 533 561 learners who wrote the first NSC examination in 2008, 464 179 (87%) studied English as a ‘first additional Language’ (DOE, 2008).

Our paper analyses (a) the Further Education and Training, First Additional Language National Curriculum Statement (DOE, 2003) and (b) the matriculation examination papers of the first two years (2008 and 2009) of the First Additional Language NSC examination. The analysis is framed in terms of our roles as academic literacy teachers in an English medium university. We facilitate the school-to-university transition of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have generally been taught English as a first additional language at school. A central aim of this analysis is to contribute to our understanding of the discourses that students bring with them when they enter university, and how these articulate or do not articulate with the discourses of academia. In this respect, our lens is different from the quite technical, comprehensive evaluation conducted by the Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education (Umalusi, 2009) which compared the old National Education (NATED 550) and new NSC curriculum and examination papers in order to assess whether standards have been maintained. Our focus is an analysis of both the explicit and implicit notions of what it means to be literate in a discourse.

Here, we use a post-structuralist notion of ‘discourse’ to describe the accepted ways of ‘saying-doing-being-valuing-believing’ (Gee, 1990: 142) in relation to the kinds of reading and writing that characterise particular contexts. The discourses that characterise dominant institutions reflect a choice of language medium, as well as a choice of specialised patterns of talking, reading and writing (genres). Both choices are inextricably bound to the values, attitudes and processes of knowledge construction that are judged socially acceptable by the institution and the wider community. In Gee’s (1990: xviii) terms, literacy is always socially situated:

[t]here is no such thing as ‘reading’ or ‘writing’, only reading and writing *something* (a text of a certain type) in a certain way with certain values while at least appearing to think and feel in certain ways. We read and write only within a Discourse....

Our assumption is that, although individuals have agency, institutional discourses are powerful socialising agents and that, in order to succeed, individuals are generally required to take up subject positions within their ideological frameworks. Our paper thus examines both the values, attitudes and beliefs that are evident in the official documents, as well as the levels of cognitive engagement required, and notions of reading and writing that are privileged.

THE NOTION OF LANGUAGE IN THE NATIONAL STATEMENT

There is no longer a distinct curriculum for English as a subject in the South African education system. The language curriculum documents are identical in content across the eleven official languages. This signals a political shift in that it de-emphasises the strong discourses associated with the teaching of particular languages in Apartheid South Africa. Apartheid policy conflated language with ethnicity/race as a primary means of implementing

a policy of divide and rule. As Prinsloo (2006:198) shows in her insightful historical analyses of first-language English, Afrikaans and Zulu curricula during Apartheid, the discourses of those language curricula effected 'cultural and political work' specific to each language. Prinsloo (2006) describes and analyses the colonial and Apartheid legacy present in the construction of literacy and the learners. Learners were positioned racially, ethnically and in very specific social class terms that accorded with Apartheid constructions of students' present lives and future social and economic roles in society.

The 'Language' curriculum does, however, distinguish between different levels of language learning, *viz* 'home' language and 'additional' languages. This distinction signals congruence with the 'Language-in-Education Policy' which was introduced by the Department of Education in 1997. The Policy advocates teaching through the medium of the home language whilst learning additional languages as subjects, or else teaching through the medium of two languages. It reflects the strong influence of Cummins' (1984) theory of additive bilingualism on South African thinking about the role of language in learning. In brief, Cummins (1996) points out that, if learners are well motivated and have adequate teaching support, they generally acquire basic interpersonal communication skills in a second language relatively easily. However, cognitive academic language proficiency, which entails using language in decontextualised, cognitively demanding situations, is far harder to acquire. Cummins and Swain (1986) argue that it is preferable initially to teach literacy-related skills in only one language in a gradual process over a number of years. Once they are well-established in one language, literacy-related skills will transfer more easily to the other language. In this conception, language is seen as a resource for critical and analytical thinking. The South African argument is that, under Apartheid education (in former Department of Education and Training schools), an early switch to English by African language speakers, combined with poor teaching, has resulted in students developing basic interpersonal skills in English, but not the cognitive academic language proficiency skills needed to deal with advanced levels of literacy and abstract concepts in either the home language or in English (Heugh *et al.*, 1995).

The new Curriculum Statement (DOE, 2003: 11) states that it 'may' be the case that students learn through the medium of their First Additional Language in the South African context. This is a considerable understatement. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of learners are studying through the medium of English in the same way that home language learners do, but they study the subject of English as an additional language. The majority of these are African-language speakers who come from print-impooverished home backgrounds and study at relatively poorly resourced, overcrowded working-class township or rural schools. Research has shown that the classroom reality is that teachers often mediate content subjects in the home language and make extensive use of code-switching to compensate for lack of proficiency in English (Adler & Reed, 2002 and Kapp, 2006). Thus, the labels of Cummins' theory are used when, in fact, the conceptual frame and contexts are substantially different (Kapp, 2006). In our view, not naming, and therefore not describing, the particular, high status role that English plays in the curriculum for the majority, obscures the fact that the 1997 policy has been ignored by schools. In addition, Van der Walt's (2010: 326) excellent critique of the use of a generic First Additional Language curriculum for all the languages of teaching and learning makes the important point that the curriculum does not take into account the situated nature of language use. Her analysis shows that the generic curriculum is in effect an English second language curriculum which assumes that 'all languages are structured like English, are used like English and have the resources required to teach these so-called generic, but actually English second language curricula'.

APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNERS IN THE NEW CURRICULUM

As was the case with the old National Education curriculum, the new curriculum takes a communicative language teaching approach (CLT) to second-language teaching. Central to communicative language teaching is Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence, which encompasses not only (conscious and unconscious) knowledge of linguistic structures, but also the skill of using language appropriately in actual communicative events in different contexts in order to achieve specific purposes. Negotiation of meaning and the ability to produce sustained discourse is primary (Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2000).

However, there are significant differences in the conceptual frame of the two curricula.³ Whereas the old curriculum takes a strongly oral and functional approach to communicative language teaching which foregrounds the use of language 'appropriately' in everyday, relatively informal situations (see Kapp, 2004 for this critique), the new curriculum foregrounds critical, analytical thinking skills (used in 6 out of the 9 curriculum objectives). There is a strong emphasis on being able to engage critically with power relations and social issues, engage with alternative worldviews, and on being able to offer reasoned opinions on ethical issues and values. There is coherence between the construction of learners as critical thinkers and the explicit text-based approach in the new curriculum which stresses the development of close, critical analysis of a range of texts. The approach has its theoretical base in Genre Theory, which emphasises the need to facilitate access to dominant discourses by explicit teaching of the text types that characterise the discourse (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993 and Moran & Herrington, 2005). In this approach, students are conceptualised as apprentices who are inducted into the discipline through careful scaffolding. Interestingly, this approach contrasts starkly with one of the OBE emphases on learning through experience and exploration, but accords with the critique of (particularly second language, strongly communicative language) teaching approaches which do not provide sufficient explicit mediation (see Cope & Kalantzis, 1993 and Widdowson, 1991).

This text-based approach is visible in the very detailed specification of content, level and skills in the curriculum, particularly with regard to reading and writing. The Reading outcome in the new curriculum requires students to 'to read and view for understanding and to evaluate critically and respond to a wide range of texts'. The required assessment standards are spelt out in considerable detail (DOE, 2003: 22-31). In contrast to the relatively general and discrete list in the previous curriculum, as well as the OBE de-emphasis of content, it specifies a sophisticated range of sentence-level close-analysis skills within the context of critical analysis of particular genres. The genres and their particular features are made explicit. For example, in the context of literary analysis, students are required to use their understanding of specialised literary language to show how the language contributes to meaning. They are required to locate point of view; to analyse values and attitudes; and to explain how texts are constructed within particular socio-political and cultural contexts.

The Writing outcome is similarly detailed, explicit and located in context (DOE 2003, 32-37). Students are required 'to write and present for a wide range of purposes and audiences using conventions and formats appropriate to diverse contexts'. (DOE, 2003: 32). In keeping with the genre approach, notions of audience and purpose are foregrounded alongside knowledge of conventions at the discourse and sentence level. The notion of writing as a process which involves planning and drafting is evident, and is placed alongside the development of a metalanguage about what constitutes good writing.

The literacy practices of the old curriculum are orientated towards the development of basic interpersonal communication skills in a limited range of everyday contexts. Whereas the old curriculum described the importance of the development of cognitive academic language proficiency and stressed the importance of writing, the new curriculum identifies and describes the literacy-related skills required to develop such proficiency. It produces a metalanguage which facilitates the development of critical language awareness of texts. Notwithstanding the substantial issue that teachers at both well-resourced and township schools have huge difficulties interpreting and mediating this metalanguage (see Blommaert *et al.*, 2005; Hendricks, 2008 and Sacks, 2010), the document itself is a significant improvement on the previous version both in terms of cognitive level and in terms of its projection of language as a tool for critical and creative thinking.

APPROACH TO LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LEARNERS IN THE EXAMINATION PAPERS

There is a considerable mismatch between the curriculum emphasis on language as a critical tool, and the cognitively undemanding and conservative examination papers. In this section of the paper we present and analyse typical texts and questions from the 2008 and 2009 examination papers to demonstrate this mismatch. Grade twelve first additional language learners are required to write three examination papers which test language comprehension, writing (creative writing and essays) and analysis of literary texts. Papers 1 (Language) and 3 (Writing) were set nationally, and Paper 2 (Literature) was set at the Provincial level.

We begin with Paper 1 (Language). The texts set for both the 2008 and 2009 Language Papers are taken from popular magazines or tabloids. One article is adapted from a daily newspaper. The texts often focus on personal and animal stories. Students are seldom invited to critique power relations, and glaring stereotypes generally are unquestioned. Vocabulary and syntactic structures are generally basic and the texts are written in a colloquial, often conversational register. Unlike argumentative texts, these texts do not lend themselves to close, critical analysis either at sentence or discourse level, because they do not contain abstract concepts, metaphoric meanings or context-specific register and the simple narrative structure does not require one to distinguish main point from evidence or to infer implied meaning. The texts are written at the level of oral conversation and, in Cummins' (1996) terms, comprehension requires basic interpersonal communication skills rather than cognitive academic language proficiency. The extract below from the comprehension question for 2008 serves to illustrate this critique. The text, adapted from *Bona* magazine, focuses on the Joubert family who had 'adopted' a baby hippo named Jessica. Comprehension is aided by a picture of Mr Joubert feeding the hippo alongside his dogs.

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1. Meet Jessica. She likes her coffee sweet, has nine bull terrier dogs as her friends and sleeps under a pink blanket on a mattress on the stoep. She also happens to be a hippo.
2. As a newborn, she was washed up on the banks of the Selati River in Hoedspruit during the 2000 floods. She was rescued by former game ranger, Tonie Joubert, who lives beside the river....

The text describes an idealised space where people live in harmony with nature and the hippo's interactions with the Jouberts are anthropomorphised. A similar notion of an Africa

devoid of complex and contradictory social realities is presented in the 2009 language paper. An advertisement for Buffalo City (a game lodge in the Eastern Cape) and an article on the African elephant from *Sawubona* (airline) magazine both imply that South Africa is a place where ‘cultures’ have been ‘preserved for centuries’ and wildlife is ‘untamed’. All three texts reinforce essentialised notions of Africa as an exotic space removed from the rest of the world.

A number of the texts in both the 2008 and the 2009 papers contain strongly gendered moral parables and exhortations. For example, the text chosen for the comprehension section of the 2008 paper tells the story of Buyiswa who wrote her matriculation examinations in 1990. The article juxtaposes Buyiswa’s poor living conditions with her determination to pursue a dream to become a social worker. The text suggests that success resides within the individual and that individuals should rise above their social conditions through nurturing a dream. While there are strong prescriptive messages embedded in the article about how young people should behave, Buyiswa’s success story masks gendered notions of the social roles of males and females. Evident in the texts are stereotypes such as the male as provider (represented by Buyiswa’s uncle) and the black female as social worker, care giver, domestic worker and single mother. A similarly stereotypically gendered message is presented in a *Daily Sun* article on the advantages of modelling entitled ‘These beautiful girls have big dreams!’. The article discusses the success of ‘beautiful girls’ between the ages of 18 and 21, some of whom had completed grade 12 the previous year. We are told that modelling keeps them ‘off the street’ and teaches them ‘how to be successful in life’. In the 2009 paper, an article on Florence Nightingale appears to present a woman who challenges the norms of her society, but in effect constructs women’s identities as caregivers and moral custodians of society.

Similarly, the majority of tasks in the Writing examinations are detached from complex social relations. As in the Language Papers, many tasks infantilise learners with questions such as ‘I am an aging animal’ or friendly letters in which learners need to describe an ‘unforgettable trip’. The 2009 paper presents a picture of entwined diamond rings (from *Sawubona* airline magazine) and requires students to write about a topic that comes to mind. Conventional gender stereotypes are reinforced in the suggested prompts: ‘love and relationships’; ‘the meaning of marriage’ and ‘girls and diamonds’. Although there are a few argumentative and expository writing tasks that require critical engagement with social issues such as gender or South Africa’s hosting of the world cup, in general, the writing tasks in both years are mainly descriptive, decontextualised, uncritical and cognitively undemanding.

Although the examination papers present different types of texts, such as advertisements and cartoons, genre knowledge of these forms and students’ ability to analyse and evaluate how the texts construct audience and purpose and how they function in their contexts are not tested. In contrast to the focus on genre in the curriculum, texts are generally decontextualised. For example, the summary question in 2008 requires learners to summarise an article on ‘How to take care of your takkies’ for an oral presentation. It is unclear why an oral presentation would consist of a summary of a text and, since the article’s content consists of a series of instructions, it is hardly suitable material for an oral presentation. Further, (as is also evident from the memorandum) similarly to the summary exercise in 2009, the task requires almost no meta-knowledge of text structure for the task of summarising (that is, of distinguishing important information from detail).

The low level of cognitive engagement required by the Language examination papers is further illustrated by the questions based on the ‘Hippo’ text in the extract below from the 2008 examination:

- 1.1. How did Jessica come to live with the Jouberts?
- 1.2. State THREE ways from the passage in which Jessica is different from the hippos in the wild.
- 1.3. It was unwise of the Jouberts to raise Jessica, a wild animal, as a ‘human being’. Do you agree with this view? Give a reason for your answer.
Jessica still had her ‘umbilical cord’ attached when Tony Joubert found her. What does this mean?
Why does Jessica sleep on the stoep?
- 1.4. Does Jessica know the layout of the Jouberts’ house well? Give a reason for your answer.
State TWO points from the passage which show that the Jouberts now regard Jessica as their ‘child’.

If we consider questions 1.1; 1.2; 1.5; and 1.7, we find that the questions require simple factual retrieval and summarising. Only questions 1.3 and 1.6 require some level of interpretation and reasoning, but at a relatively cognitively undemanding level. Knowledge of genre and understanding of narrative perspective is not tested.

The Literature Papers cover a broad range of texts and genres as schools are allowed to choose from a range of prescribed texts. However, the questions in the various provincial papers are similarly cognitively undemanding. The examples below from the Eastern Cape 2008 and Western Cape 2009 papers (respectively) serve to illustrate this point:

- 3.8 When the author does not tell us directly of Donald’s sickness, it shows us the secretive person he is. Quote a sentence from the extract to support this claim.
- 3.9 Where does the conversation between the two characters take place?
- 3.10 What have the two characters come to do at this place?
From *Simplicity* by Frances Hunter

- (a) Why does Tybalt challenge Romeo to a duel?
- (b) Give TWO reasons why Romeo is unwilling to fight Tybalt.
- (c) Do you think Romeo is justified in eventually killing Tybalt? Explain why you think so.
From *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare

Surface-level, ‘wh’ (what, who, why, where, when and how) questions predominate. These require students to summarise plot, identify themes and describe character and setting. There is little sense of close, critical engagement with the metaphoric layer of texts or with the narrative point of view. There are very few essay questions in the various Literature examination papers, and essay tasks are largely descriptive, as in the example below from the Eastern Cape 2008 paper:

- Write a comprehensive account of the relationship between Donald and the young woman with reference to:
- How the two meet each other and what their respective problems are; and
 - How their being together would be of advantage and benefit to both of them.

- Describe both the woman and the man's characters and the way the simple-mindedness of the woman results in quick, simple solutions.
- From "Simplicity" by Frances Hunter

The answers are pre-structured through the guide-questions and invite students to 're-tell' the plot rather than engage in analysis of narrative construction. In contrast to the curriculum emphasis on disciplinary knowledge and on understanding the socio-cultural context of literary production, the literary questions are often discrete and decontextualised.

CONCLUSION

The First Additional Language Curriculum Statement caters for the level of cognitive academic language proficiency needed to use English effectively across the curriculum. Students are conceptualised as critical, creative and independent thinkers. However, the students who write the examination papers are positioned in quite conservative ways. The cognitive challenge of the examination papers has not changed from factual retrieval, recall and labelling noted by Yeld *et al* (2004) and Kapp (2004). Disturbingly, the Umalusi (2009: 32) report commends the standard of the 2008 examination papers.

The wash-back effect of examinations on literacy practices cannot be underestimated, particularly in an examination-driven society such as South Africa where the matriculation results are used as the single, public measure of educational success. In such a context, the matriculation examination plays a major role in determining classroom language and literacy practices because it is *the* criterion by which the success or failure of the system is measured. It is well known that there is a long history of teachers teaching to the test through the use of past examination papers in order to compensate for their own struggles with the language and lack of appropriate training (see Adler & Reed (Eds), 2002; Heugh, 2000 and Kapp, 2004).

As in the past, by making it possible to pass at a very basic level, the examination system in effect obscures the contradiction that English is taught as a second language although it is the medium of instruction. Because the ESL pass rate is high (according to Department of Education, 2008, 95% in 2008 and, before that, always well over 90%) compared to other subjects, the key role that language plays in influencing the kind of cognitive development that takes place across the curriculum is obscured. The importance of language as a tool for critical and creative thinking is acknowledged at a rhetorical level, but not in practice. For the students who are educated under the system and who need to use English as a first language in their content curricula and in higher education, learning the language in such a functional manner is likely to contribute to constraining their futures.

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END NOTES

The new curriculum documents use the term ‘additional’ language rather than ‘second’ language to indicate that students are often multilingual and have more than two languages. The curriculum documents use the term ‘first additional language’ to describe the second language that students learn.

² It is part of a larger longitudinal study which tracks the undergraduate progress of one hundred of the 2008 matriculants who have been admitted into the university *via* special admissions.

³The evaluation conducted by Umalusi (2009) correctly points out that the NCS is particularly cognitively demanding in comparison with the NATED 550 curriculum with regard to reading and writing. It also recognises the new text-based approach. However, it fails to see that the discourse of the new curriculum is a significant departure from the previous one in its ideological framing of a critical literacy approach.

⁴ Notably, in keeping with the text-based focus, more marks are allocated to the Writing paper. However, as Umalusi (2009) points out, the length of time allocated to all three papers has been reduced, which contradicts all the research that suggests that second-language writers need additional time to read for understanding.

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