

https://dspace.org/

Five years on: [Progress report after the 1973 conference for African teachers of English].

Holmes, Harold

1978
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27603
Holmes, H. (1978). Five years on: [Progress report after the 1973 conference for African teachers of English]. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 50-53.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Five Years On

HAROLD HOLMES

English-speaking people pride themselves on using a "world" or "international" language, though English is not the most widely spoken, coming second to Mandarin Chinese, with about 660 million speakers. English-speakers number 363 million, followed by Russian with 240 million; Spanish quickly overtaking Russian with 232 million; and then French, a long way down with 92 million (*Geographical Magazine*, Feb 1978). Spanish can lay claim to being an international language by reason of its distribution in Europe, NW Africa, Central and South America, and the Phillipines, but not in the same sense that English is. F G French (*Teaching English as an International Language*. OUP) is quite forthright:

> By accidents of history and by the rapid spread of industrial development, science, technology, international trade, and by something like an explosion in the speed and ease of travel and by all the factors which have broken down frontiers and forced nations into closer interdependence, English has become a world language. It is *the* means of international communication; there is no other. English is now taught as the 'second language' in nearly every country in the world. Every advance in science, in engineering, in trade, in politics, in every branch of human thought is discussed, printed, disseminated and made available in English . . .
>
> Without a knowledge of English a young man or woman starting on a career is gravely handicapped. (pp 1,2).

The position in our own country is similar. Although Afrikaans-speaking Whites dominate government and administration and use Afrikaans to the full — and increasingly in business and industry — English is regarded as their other language (no longer the enemy's language) offering great advantages in world contracts and communication. In certain, mainly Black, rural areas, Afrikaans is also dominant, as anyone who has conversed with Blacks in the Northern Transvaal knows well, but we need not reiterate the educational resistance to Afrikaans which sparked off the 'troubles' of 1976 and 1977. The Blacks, speaking a number of different though related Bantu languages, see in English, not merely one of the 'official' languages of the country, therefore useful, but their medium of communication with the rest of the world, especially perhaps the United States, Britain and Canada, but potentially with other Black states south of the Equator. Blacks want English as the medium of education, in homelands and outside.

Nevertheless, after nearly two centuries of 'English-medium' education in Black schools — church once, now state, the standard of English is pathetically low among the mass of the people, especially in those areas outside the main urban centres. Speak to a young Black in Std 8, to all appearances bright, and communication is too often non-existent, English-speakers lecturing to audiences of Black teachers, even high school teachers, often feel frustrated and despondent because they are not 'getting across'.

Languages may be learnt naturally, as the child learns his mother tongue, or as a person 'picks up' a language he is forced to understand and use in his environment. But, in general, most people are taught the second language, whatever it happens to be, in school, by good and bad teachers using good and bad methods, with or without motivation. So pupils (and adults, too, of course) depend on their teachers to set them on the road to mastery of a second language. The qualifications of teachers in Black education are much below the standard we would wish in a modern educational system. 17 percent of the Black teaching force in the Republic have no professional qualifications and have an academic standard of Junior Certificate (Std 8) or lower. Of the professionally qualified teachers (ie one or two years professional training), 18 percent have passed only St 6, 48 percent Junior Certificate, and 12 percent matriculation. Just over 2 percent have university degrees. (*A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*, 1977. SAIRR, p 475). The problem facing general education are frightening and the prospect of equipping pupils to receive that general education through a language other than their mother tongue rather slim.

How can the unqualified teacher cope with the difficulties of second language teaching (SLT), especially when he or she is not an English-speaker? There are the further problems of available time — usually too little; size of class — often double the number of pupils found in White education; the wide range of ability among pupils; and often an environment where the second language is rarely or never heard or used.

Linton Stone stresses the more linguistic problems (*Teaching English to Second Language Students*. Evans, 1974):

> Listen to a student read, speak or repeat in English, or look at his written work, and you will soon notice his four main problems. Pronouncing visually according to his mother tongue; pronouncing what he hears, or thinks he hears, by approximating to sounds nearest to those in his mother tongue; forcing English into standardised form by mistranslation; writing according to mother tongue sound-spelling and word-order. Looked at through the eyes and ears of any other language, English does not sound as it is written, is not written as it sounds. (p28)

Could nothing be done to help the embattled teachers and so raise the standard? was the question that faced the English Academy of Southern Africa. After all, the state of English was the Academy's concern. The first move, in 1972, was to plan a conference for African teachers of English. The burden of the planning fell of Prof. L Lanham of the Linguistics Department of the University of the Witwatersrand, whose original research and experimentation in Black schools is well known, but he had support from

such well known educationists as Dr K B Hartshorne (then Chief Education Planner of the Department of Bantu Education, and at present President of the English Academy), Mr D N Young (Communication Studies Unit, Wits), Mr R Gugushe (Secretary of the Bantu Education Advisory Board), Dr A Mawasha (Senior Lecturer in Education, University of the North, and now head of the linguistics department at that university), and Mrs H Hahn (Secretary of the English Academy Oral English Committee). There was also strong backing from the office of the Cultural Attache of the British Embassy, in the person of Mr John Foley, and wholehearted cooperation from the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (as it then was). The conference was held on the Roma campus in Lesotho in January 1973.

The main themes of the conference were:

1. Bridging the gap between language and literature in the classroom
2. The teaching of communication skills as a means of mastering English
3. The teaching of English through the medium of other subjects such as geography, science, etc.

The aim was "to inform teachers of English on new approaches, techniques, materials; new authors in English literature and new thinking on the goals and methods of teaching English literature . . . and to examine the goals for English teaching imposed by syllabuses and examinations" (English Academy Newsletter, 1972 p 3). Authorities from various parts of the world lectured on such topics as: teaching writing skills by guided composition; reading as a basis for writing; teaching English as communication; the teaching of literary and other uses of English; African authors; how the study of literature could be approached (Conference Programme, Jan 1973).

The conference was successful in many ways. Prof Lanham reported to the Academy Executive that there had been a good attendance of teachers from all parts of the Republic, and from Lesotho and Swaziland; several publishers and the British Council had put on book exhibitions which were outstanding from the teachers' point of view; and that speakers, especially Mr H G Widdowson, from Edinburgh University, had expounded new ideas that generated much enthusiasm. Teacher participation in workshop groups had been exceptional after a hesitant start (EA Ex Co Minutes, Jan 1973).

The matter could not just be left there. How could there be a continuing support for Black teachers of English who had felt isolated and to whom the conference at Roma had been a unique experience? The feeling in the Academy, and especially among conference committee members, was that the Academy, if it was to maintain its principles, was committed to create some organisation that would keep the ideas and experience of Roma alive. Prof Lanham saw this organisation in the form of an Information Centre to which teachers would have permanent access and which would act as a clearing-house for new ideas, would generate new ideas, and where information on specific topics and themes in English teaching would be readily available. Such a body would replace the Oral English Committee and would be in every sense an organising centre to promote the teaching of English. It would also run courses, conferences, and workshops, and produce a much-needed Newsletter (ibid).

The same meeting formally agreed that the Academy was prepared to give all help possible, to the limit of its resources which it would try to expand. So the English Language Teaching Information Centre (ELTIC) was born. Looking back, the setting-up of ELTIC was an act of faith. To the English Academy, with limited financial resources, the cost of running ELTIC was a matter of great concern, and the centre has never been able to work to anything but a small budget. The trusts (like Anglo-American, Lowenstein, Bantu Welfare, Haggart) have given considerable assistance, as has the Council of Education, Witwatersrand. The budget for 1973-74 was about R12 000 Expansion has obviously been limited by shortage of money, as will appear later in this survey.

ELTIC itself was not the only thing that came out of the Roma conference. I have already mentioned the 'isolation' of the Black teacher of English, and it seemed urgent that an association of teachers of English in Black schools should be formed. The Association of English Teachers (AET) came into being at about the same time as ELTIC, organised largely by Dr Mawasha and a small group of enthusiasts. The plan was that ELTIC and AET would work closely together towards the aims envisaged for the Information Centre. That a more vigorous association between the two bodies has not come about is a matter of regret and concern. There will be more comment on this later.

In July 1973, the first Newsletter, edited by Prof Lanham, appeared and records the ideas that had crystallised over the six months since the Roma conference. A Steering Committee had been set up to help carry out the objectives envisaged for ELTIC, inter alia.

1. to open an office in Braamfontein at the Academy headquarters
2. to start a reference library of evaluated teaching materials (books, tapes, reading laboratory, teaching aids, charts, etc.) It was hoped that these materials would be donated by publishers
3. to assemble teaching kits including books, tapes and CCTV tapes around certain main themes relating to specific teaching needs (among these are teaching English literature in the form of set-books; teaching reading skills; guided composition; teaching oral English in primary schools; teaching pronunciation to Africans; English as a medium; Use of dictionary)
4. to answer queries as far as the Centre could arising from the problems of teaching English
5. to organise demonstrations, exhibitions, mini-conferences, etc
6. to bring together where possible groups of experts and teachers to examine problem areas and explore ways and means of tackling them (*ELTIC Newsletter, no* 1, *July* 1973).

The question has sometimes been asked whether such a privately run scheme as ELTIC could be justified in view of the fact that the Department of Bantu Education (now the Department of Education and Planning) ran its own in-service training schemes. There are a number of answers to this question as the Academy saw it:

1. The staff and funds of Bantu Education were over-committed to the basic needs of education
2. It was desirable to offer teachers an informal advice and assistance service to supplement that available in the formal employer/employee relationship
3. It was also valuable to offer private individuals of goodwill an opportunity of assisting the Department's efforts to improve Black education, and generally promote goodwill (Memorandum on ELTIC, May 1976).

Relations between the Department of Bantu Education and ELTIC have been cordial. Occasionally there has been a questioning of our efforts, not at top level, but at the local. Once our aims had been made clear, there was helpful co-operation from inspectors and other officials. Readers of this article will be aware of the delicate situation between the two official languages in Black schools.

The Steering Committee, under the chairmanship of Prof. Lanham, brought together to plan and carry ,out the stated objectives of the Centre proved effective, but after a year's operation on a limited scale, it became clear that the work being done by the Centre could not continue and expand with only voluntary help, and there was urgent need for the appointment of a full-time Field Officer who could go to the mountain when necessary. The Academy accepted the recommendation, and after careful evaluation of the applicants for the post, Mrs Hermine Mpakanyane was appointed Field Officer. Mrs Mpakanyane was a past student of the Kilnerton Training College (where Dr Hartshorne had been principal), was well-known in the Black community, had wide interests through the YWCA, and, perhaps most important, was a good teacher and highly articulate in English. Thousands of Black teachers of English have learnt to respect her contributions at conferences and workshops.

AET was apparently prospering. The Association was active in Transkei and Ciskei, with Lumko as focal point, and work was being carried out at the University of the North, in Soweto, Pretoria, Vereeniging and the East Rand. All the Homelands, except two, had chosen English as medium of instruction in the schools. The future for ELTIC and AET was rosy.

Mobility for the Field Officer now became a priority and a light Mazda van was purchased through the good offices of the Anglo-American Corporation to enable Mrs Mpakanyane to visit difficult-to-get-at places and transport books and equipment to courses and conferences. This vehicle has had a rather chequered career and may have to be replaced in the near future; without independent transport the work of ELTIC would be greatly circumscribed. At the AGM of the Academy in September 1974, Prof Lanham was able to report that ELTIC was being successful in achieving its aims of promoting interest and inquiry into English teaching, involving new methods and ideas; organising seminars and conferences; issuing a Newsletter which served as a clearing-house for organised groups of teachers all over the country; and making new materials where there was a need for them. Courses had been held in Soweto, Lumko, GaRankuwa and the Vaal triangle. (*AGM Minutes*, 1974).

It is interesting to note that the budget for major conferences in 1974 was R900, had doubled in 1976, and has risen to R4 000 this year. It was policy that teachers attending major conferences should have their board and accommodation paid for out of ELTIC funds, but that they must bear the cost of getting to the conference.

By the end of 1975, it was accepted that ELTIC was one of the most important of the Academy's activities, and that if money and personnel were available, the things that ELTIC could do were 'infinite.' Nevertheless the question was asked whether the Centre was effecting any change in the deeply entrenched methods of English-teaching in the classroom. Prof Lanham reported to the 1975 AGM that there were signs of more of ELTIC's and other new material penetrating the classroms. Teachers were trying out new methods, and there was no conflict with the In-service Training Centre of the Department of Bantu education. ELTIC realised the need for expansion into new areas, for example, Kwa-Zulu and Natal areas, but lack of money remained a serious problem.

At the end of 1975, Prof Lanham, who had been the key person in ELTIC's growth, relinquished the chairmanship of the Steering Committee, as he was to spend a year at Grahamstown. I was asked to fill the gap while he was away and rather reluctantly agreed. My hesitation was that I could not bring the linguistic expertise of Prof Lanham to the job, but hoped that I could keep the administration on right and expanding lines.

During 1976, the Academy accepted the fact that ideally ELTIC should have a full-time Director. This person would be a paragon of all the virtues — professional qualifications in the field of ESL teaching and experience in this field, preferably in Africa; expertise in the production of support materials and in experimentation in language teaching techniques; at home in the field of public relations, both with authorities in the Republic and with Homeland and independent governments; and some knowledge of mobilising interests in support of ELTIC's work.

Financial stringency has prevented our pursuing this course, except in a rather superficial way. Staff, however, at ELTIC HQ has increased and now comprises an administrative secretary and a part-time typist in addition to the Field Officer. The budget today is more than double that of five years ago.

Towards the middle of 1976, largely because of shortage of funds, the future existence of ELTIC was called into question. A number of issues took prominence. First there was the realisation and acceptance of the fact that Black teachers of English were increasingly looking to ELTIC for help, and this help should continue. Second, there was

the old argument that a private body should not be doing what was really the responsibility of a state department or of homeland governments. The answer to this was that the Deparment of Bantu Education had not been hostile, and there had been some appreciation of our work; acceptance of ELTIC by the Secretaries of Education of Transkei, Ciskei, KwaZulu, Bophuthatswana, and Lebowa was the most encouraging sign for the future. Third, that the work must be expanded rather than restricted (*EA Ex Co Minutes*, May 1976).

The Steering Committee took this as a signal to go ahead. Major conferences were held at Kwa-Nzimela (KwaZulu) and at the University of the North (for Lebowa, Gazankulu and Venda), with generous support from the British Council, and innumerable minor conferences, workshops, seminars were held in the Vaal triangle, the Reef area generally, Bophuthatswana and the North. Tribute and thanks are due to all the teachers, White and Black, who gave time and effort, voluntarily and without reward, to make these ventures a success. Special mention should be made of members of the Johannesburg College of Education English staff.

Additional support materials were being made, and set-book plays were being recorded on tape by for example the Trinity Players of Johannesburg, whose work was greatly appreciated. The Newsletter had by now become a familiar document with teachers, but needed a facelift and change of emphasis, and under the editorship of Mr Douglas Young was transformed into the ELTIC *Reporter*, carrying many useful and stimulating articles and earning greater support. We hope to expand the *Reporter* further to give it greater impact and value to teachers.

AET has not expanded as we would have wished, in spite of vigorous efforts by Dr Mawasha and others. This failing is common among professional bodies. ELTIC had hoped that there would be local branches of AET all over the country to act as agents for ELTIC, whip up interest in English-language teaching, and help in the local organisation of courses. There has been help, but not on the scale we had hoped for. At present, Dr Mawasha is again busy trying to set up branches of AET at key-points in the Republic and Homelands. The troubles of 1976 and 1977 upset ELTIC's work considerably in the Johannesburg area and we almost lost touch with colleagues in Soweto where the morale of the teacher had fallen to a low level. In 1977, for example, ELTIC organised a week's conference in the July holiday primarily for Soweto teachers. This was held in the city. Although we had in the end an average attendance of 80, only a handful came from Soweto. This year we have been getting our Soweto teachers back to seminars and workshops at headquarters. We are moving into larger quarters and this should facilitate this special aspect of our work.

ELTIC has tried to stick to the aims stated earlier and will continue to do so. People have asked whether ELTIC's work may overlap with that going on in the linguistic departments of universities or such bodies as the Institute for the Study of English in Africa at Rhodes University. Academy opinion is that there need be no overlap. ELTIC is not a research body; it is concerned with problems in the classroom, which obviously may need to be researched. ELTICs job is rather that of middleman, to carry the fruits of research into the classroom (*EA Ex Co Minutes*, November 1976).

We can be optimistic about the future provided we can get the necessary funds. ELTIC is dealing, on a small scale it is true, with the problem of the competent and efficient teaching of English as a second language; it is not in a position to improve the teacher's formal qualifications. That is the responsibility of the Department of Education and Planning and the universities, White as well as Black, preferably in collaboration. The Academy's prime concern is with the English language, home and second, and stresses the urgency of having an adequate force of skilled teachers, Black and White, to teach the language. But its concern obviously must extend beyond the teaching of English as a subject to the use of correct English as a medium under those Black authorities which have chosen English as the language of instruction. The challenge of the future must be evident to all.